

Katriina Heljakka

Principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures

From Wow to Flow to Glow



It is noteworthy to point out, how often toys are defined solely as objects related to childhood, and not as playthings for all ages. Even though play theories often dismiss adults as toy players, grown-ups are now coming out of their toy closets.

To all the adult toy players in the world.

I know who You are,
as I too, am one of You.

Katriina Heljakka

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From Wow to Flow to Glow

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Delicote, 2010

Contents of my toy 'closet'

(At the time of writing the final version of this thesis)

Two Blythe dolls (by Takara, original Blythe designer Allison Katzman, purchased online)

Littlest Pet Shop Blythe doll (by Hasbro, designer unknown, purchased in Finland)

Alice in Wonderland Mini Pullip Doll (designer Cheonsang Cheoncha, purchased in Japan)

Uglydoll plastic figures (several different characters, designers David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim, purchased in the U.S.A.)

Uglydoll soft toy (Ice-Bat, designers David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim, purchased in the U.S.A.)

Francis soft toy (designer Ingrid Von Bergen, purchased at New York toy fair)

Kauzbot soft toy (purchased at New York toy fair)

Stitch figurine (Disney, purchased at a Disney store, I don't remember where)

Miniature racing car (received as a sample at a toy fair)

Roberts vintage radio in pink (received as a Christmas gift)

Jar of Mamelog nano building bricks (purchased in a toy shop in San Francisco)

Packet of 5576 standard Lego bricks (purchased in a toy shop in Finland)

Packet of wooden, coloured letter and alphabet building blocks (purchased in a toy shop in Finland)

Minna Parikka high heel shoes, two pairs (others were a birthday gift, the other pair bought in the sales)

Vinyl bambi (Babie) (received as a Christmas gift, originally purchased in San Francisco)

Paola Suhonen's gun-shaped reflectors, 2 pieces (bought in Finland and customized into necklaces)

Hello Kitty plastic figure (purchased somewhere in Japan)

Gloomy Bear plastic figure (designer Mori Chack, purchased at Toy Tokyo in New York)

Disney Vinylmation Mickey plastic figure (purchased in a Disney store in New York)

Boo Boo dolls soft toy (by designer collective Helle Freude, purchased at the International Toy Fair in Nuremberg)

Aminals soft toy (Duggy character, purchased at New York toy fair)

Soft toy chamels (purchased from a street market in Dubai and near the pyramids in Cairo)

Super 7 Ghost Land Pegleg and Bump figures (designer Brian Lynn, received as a gift in Super 7 toy store, San Francisco)

Tokidoki Bruttino plastic figure (purchased at Playlounge toy store in London)

Kidrobot plastic figure (received as a gift)

Takashi Murakami(esque) plastic figure (received as a gift)

...not to mention the toys from other periods of my life that are scattered in other locations.



On the shore, 2011

Summary

This study approaches the complex phenomenon of adult interaction with contemporary toys. It presents a wide range of theoretical and popular views on toys as artefacts and playful tools connected to both material and digital worlds. By doing so, it opens up a novel area of research that so far, has been overshadowed by an understanding of toys as artefacts limited to childhood and children's play.

The purpose of this thesis is to increase understanding of the manifold dimensions of adult toy play. By drawing on literature on design and play theories, sociology and anthropology, and utilizing materials collected from visual, material, popular and digital cultures, the study constructs supplementary views to adult relationships, interaction and activities with toys.

This thesis explores how adults approach, bond and play with contemporary, industrially produced toys with a face, namely dolls, soft toys and action figures that range from playthings with a human likeness to characters derived from fantasy.

By comparing the cultural history of toys and previous theories of play with an empirical analysis of adult play with contemporary toys, the author suggests a broader understanding of toys as visual and material, narrative and communicational artefacts that function not only as containers of memories, but as playthings that carry the potential for encouraging the players to creative play and communication both offline and online – in the intimacy of home and in the playgrounds of art and social media.

Designers have an important role in creating playful experiences through toy design, but in the light of this study, it is the player who ultimately develops the dimensions of use for the playthings and thus has the final say in the playful quality of the design work. Toy designers must then understand both play and the players – maybe even be considered players themselves.

In conclusion, this thesis offers views on the principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures and by doing so, opens up the discussion of adults as a more widely acknowledged audience for toy design work and toy research of the future.

Tiivistelmä

Tutkimukseni käsittelee aikuisen leluleikin monimuotoista ilmiötä. Kirja esittelee laaja-alaisesti teoreettisia ja populaareja näkemyksiä leluista artefakteina ja leikin työkaluina, jotka toimivat osana materiaalisia ja digitaalisia ympäristöjä. Väitöskirja avaa näin ollen uutta tutkimusaluetta, joka on aiemmin sivuutettu huomion keskittyessä lapsuudessa tapahtuvaan leluleikkiin. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kasvattaa ymmärrystä aikuisen leluleikin monia ulottuvuuksia kohtaan.

Tutkimus hyödyntää kirjallisuutta kulttuurihistorian, sosiologian, antropologian, visuaalisen kulttuurin, muotoilututkimuksen ja leikinteorian kentiltä ja käyttää visuaalisia, materiaalisia, digitaalisia ja populaarikulttuurisia sekä leluteollisuuteen liittyviä aineistoja rakentaessaan näkymiä aikuisten lelusuhteisiin; leluilla tapahtuvaan vuorovaikutukseen ja toiminnallisuuteen.

Haastatteleamalla leluunittelijoita, taiteilijoita ja 'arjen leluleikkijöitä' selvitän, miten aikuiset lähestyvät ja luovat suhteita leluihin ja miten nykyajan massatuotetuilla leluesineillä leikitään. Keskityn leluihin, joilla on kasvot – tarkemmin nukkeihin, pehmoleluihin ja erilaisiin figureihin, jotka esittävät ihmishahmoa tai perustuvat mielikuvituksellisiin olentoihin.



Tuosome, 2011

Vertaamalla lelujen kulttuurihistoriaa ja aiempaa leluleikkiin suuntautuvaa leikintutkimusta tutkimuksessani tarkasteltuihin, nykyleluilla tapahtuviin aikuisen leikin muotoihin, ehdotan laajempaa ymmärrystä leluista materiaalisina, visuaalisina ja kommunikatiivisina artefakteina. Tutkimuksessa käsitellyt lelut toimivat paitsi muistisäiliöinä, myös leikin potentiaalin sisältävinä esineinä. Nykylelut kannustavat aikuisia luovaan ja vuorovaikutteiseen, niin kotiympäristössä, sosiaalisessa mediassa kuin taiteessakin tapahtuvaan leikkiin.

Muotoilijoilla on merkittävä tehtävä leikillisten elämysten ja lelujen suunnittelijoina. Tutkimuksen mukaan leikkijät määrittävät kuitenkin itse käyttötapsansa leluille. Näin ollen leikkijä ratkaisee viime kädessä muotoilijan onnistumisen leikillisen potentiaalın suunnittelijana.

Väitöstutkimus tarjoaa näkymiä aikuisiällä tapahtuvan, materiaalisia ja digitaalisia piirteitä sisältävän leluleikin periaatteisiin ja aloittaa näin keskustelun aikuisista mahdollisena – ja aiempaa tunnustetumpana – yleisönä tulevaisuuden leluunittelulle -tutkimukselle.

Preface

After playing a good game, it is quite rare that people will remember who the winner was. Rather, it is the very experience of playing the game that will stay in our mind. Toys mean wonderful moments for a person even in solitary play. But even the most awesome toy closet means nothing unless you have others to share it with.

I would like to think of this thesis as a toy closet that will offer plenty of knowledge, inspiration and a possibility to enjoy its aesthetical side for yet some time to come. Also, I would like to see it as something that is often taken from the shelf, as something that can be toyed and played with in terms of insights and ideas. A perfect toy would probably be boring and thus I do not even dream of a thesis that could not be approached critically and without challenge. Having said that I fully acknowledge the flaws and possible dents that have crept in the book during the process. But from a collector's point of view, again, small defects in manufacture may result in a true gem.

The secret of my success are the people who support me:

This research would not have been possible without Aalto University School of Art and Design and the Department of Art and Media in Pori, where it all begun once upon a time. I would like to thank Harri Laakso for guiding me at the initial stages of the research process and for his kind assistance in going through the corpus of my manuscript at its roughest. I want to thank my supervisor Jaakko Suominen for your trust, support, encouragement and for generously pointing me to useful directions and allowing me to participate in the group of cleverly pragmatist doctoral students of digital culture at the Turku University – especially Riikka, Sari, Pauliina and Pirita.

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For theoretical inspiration, I'm indebted to Brian Sutton-Smith, whom I have sadly never met although he once sat in a room next to me at a play conference reception in Rochester, New York. Thank you, Brian, for providing the world with many wise words on toys and play, and donating your archives for all of us researching these phenomena. Thank you also, Krister Svensson, for all the valuable books!

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Thank you, Boards of Women in Toys, Entertainment and Licensing (WIT), International Toy Research Association (ITRA) and Popular Culture Association of Finland (PCAF), for letting me play with you. Thank you staff and students at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Otis School of Design Los Angeles, Delft University of Technology and Fashion Institute of Technology New York, for letting me see how you toy with design. Thank you Katja Tukiainen, Kim Simonsson, Pirjo and Paola Suhonen, Walt Disney, George Lucas, David Horvath, Allison Katzman and Gina Garan for offering inspiration, great art and unforgettable stories.

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Thanks, my extended family for playing with me, when I was a child. Anni, for dancing on tables and Elisa, for that somersault in your wedding dress.

(You playful darlings – it must be the dna). I hope that the book at hand will explain to all of You, why I (too) have continued to play at adult age.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude for my nearest: My grandmother Irja for a shoulder to lean on, my father Markku for being my personal, corporate hero in the industry, my sweet sister Jemi for all things cute in life. And last, my dearest, Mika. This was not all fun and games, and yet you kept smiling. Play together, we must.

May the toys be with You all.

Playfully,

Kati



Photo: Kari Hautala

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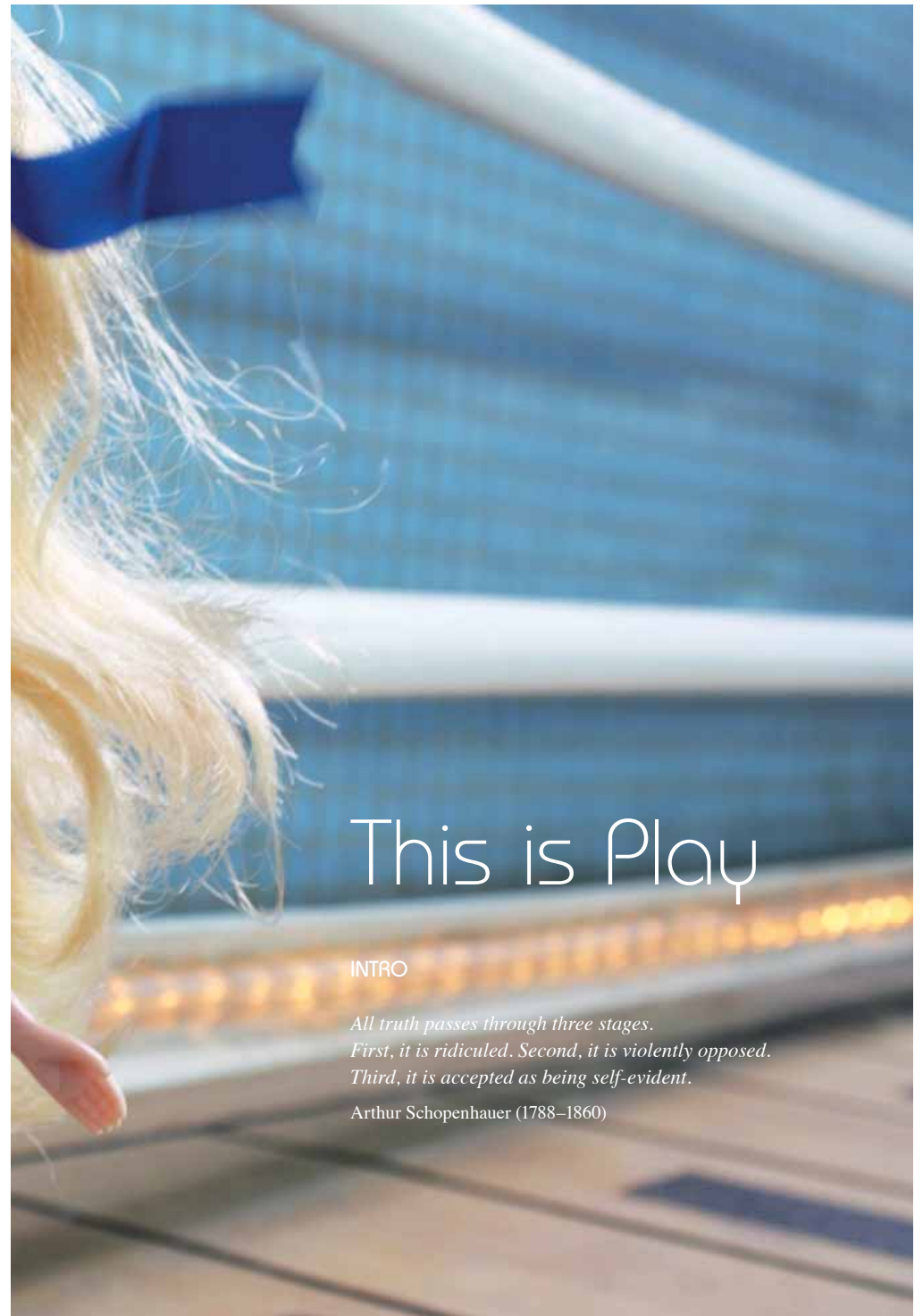
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This is Play, 2011



This is Play

INTRO

*All truth passes through three stages.
First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed.
Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.*

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)

Chapter 1: Invitation to play

Foreword: The Ludic Turn – a phenomenon in time and visual culture

Toy research is scarce.
(TR/mrl)

This thesis provides new ways of approaching adult play. It suggests that in the time of the *ludic turn*, as presented by Brian Sutton-Smith (1995, 1997), adults are showing increased interest towards toys. I have in this thesis examined how the interest towards toys turns into playful and productive activities at adult age through actual manipulation of three types of mass-produced playthings: Dolls, soft toys and action figures. The thesis is connected to larger developments in not only material and visual culture, but also social media as a part of digital culture. Adult relationships with toys that manifest both materially and digitally are examined through three topics: Toy play, toy cultures and toy player profiles.

As the topic suggests, I am proposing ideas about the principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary cultures and by doing so want to address the playful qualities of adult activities with toys beginning from the design work dedicated to toys and continuing with a discussion on the various ways of manipulation of toys at adult age as *play*. Thus, I acknowledge (and promote) a wider definition of play that extends beyond the user to both the design and the produsage¹ in relation to contemporary playthings. In other words, I recognize the principles of adult toy play not only in the use of the toy, but also in the work of the toy designer. Furthermore, as my take on the subject shows, adult toy play may also be seen as present in the work of a visual artist, who uses the toy either as an inspirational or a material resource or again as a medium in creating art.

According to a toy design booklet published by The Toys Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong the things that will never change in toy culture are – that children will play with toys, that their parents will buy these toys, that the retailers will sell the toys and ultimately, that factories will make the toys. Thus, there are four pillars that support toys as mass-produced items; the child, the parent and the industry parties. Secondly again, what will never stop changing according to the booklet is the fact that cultural and social trends are constantly shaping consumer tastes and preferences (*Think, make, play*, 2007, 11–12).

¹ *Produsage* is a term coined by Axel Bruns that has its beginnings in the writings of futurist Alvin Toffler. *Produsage* refers to the *producing* consumer. Bruns explores this concept in many works e.g. Bruns, Axel (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From production to produsage*. See <http://produsage.org/>.

During the past years, cultural and social developments have come to illustrate that the audiences for toy consumers have expanded. No longer can the mass-produced toy only be seen as a product played with by the child as adults are expressing a growing interest towards activities related to toys and play. In other words, the activities with toys, or the playthings that make adults go *wow* and that relate to the enjoyment of play, i.e. *flow* are becoming more visible in culture, thanks to the development of new media applications, through which people are willing and able to share their enduring engagement with playthings – what again, constitutes *glow*.

A preconception of myself as a researcher leads the way of the study as a guiding light: It is grounded in the idea that contemporary players are showing active interest towards the toys of today and that this enthusiasm leads to interaction, which again leads to creative and perceivable, productive outcomes of toy play. Toy designers take part in the phenomenon by designing *suggestions for play* (affordances) into toys, which are then interpreted in (adult) *acts of play* and again formulated into *invitations for play* (for the peer group of other adult players).

There will be a rhetoric of ludicism in the future, Brian Sutton-Smith predicted in his *Ambiguity of Play*, published in 1997 (149). Furthermore, he has said: *western society is beginning to take play more seriously as an important form of culture* (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 125). Liina Unt, a recent play scholar, agrees by saying that the richness of European play 'hidden or open, is notable' (Unt, 2012, 103). For example, artist couple Merja Puustinen and Andrew Best-Dunkley, makers of participatory and colourful media art have taken their works to the street, playgrounds, happenings and festivals. The artists have sensed that the importance of play is rising in the world (Ruokolainen, 2009). Simultaneously, toy play that happens at adult age has become more perceivable. The world's most innovative companies have embraced play and a playful attitude is highly respected in many professions. In year 2013, play seems indeed to have gained a much more perceivable status in culture. Furthermore, toy play has become ever more visible as an adult past time during leisure time. This may be seen in particular, by examining the playgrounds of social media.

Nevertheless, scholars and theorists, even the players themselves persist in discussing toy play related activities only as forms of 'hobbying' such as collecting. Although it is not my aim to depreciate hobbying per se, I wish to clarify and investigate further the different dimensions that adult toy play has come to mean in contemporary cultures. One of the aims of this thesis is then, the attempt to push the ideas of adult toy play beyond previous understandings of these activities acknowledged as 'hobbying' towards new interpretations of these activities as forms of *play*. Most importantly, I want to come closer to an understanding of the meanings that toys have for their adult designers, users and players.

Thus, the study reported in this thesis is my reflection on a contemporary phenomenon that needs to be acknowledged, analyzed and understood more thoroughly.

The main argument of my first chapter in this volume is to describe how toys and research focusing on them position themselves in the studies of play, how the material dimensions of play cultures are coming together as the previously understood boundaries between toys, games and entertainment – the corporeal and the virtual playgrounds – are blurring, and finally, how the realms of object play and other types of play mix when considering activities partaken with contemporary toys.

Following these leads, I will demonstrate that toys need to be examined in parallel with theories of play, because toys are the artefacts meant to be used in this activity and because there is no separate theory of toy play, at least not in the time of writing this thesis. Fortunately, as contemporary toy cultures are rich in their connections with other realms of cultural research, such as the visual, the material, the designerly, the social and the digital, I will utilize theories and materials separate from the ones concentrating purely on play in order to paint a more vivid and truthful image of what adults are now doing with their toys and at the same time, try to offer viewpoints to what motivates adults to this form of ludic engagement.

Having worked in the business of toys nearly all my life inspired me to choose the topic for my doctoral research in this very field. After spending my adult years as a board game designer and creative director of a Scandinavian board game company I wanted to sidestep a world guided by rules and regulations, strictly goal-oriented work aiming at products where the sphere – or the magic circle – of play is predetermined by regulated ways of play. So I chose a personal passion, an area of play that I had treasured even though my childhood years had flown by long ago: Toys.

What drew me towards toys was more than nostalgia: As objects, I noticed toys to start popping up in various areas of (visual) culture at an alarming frequency. Toys in adult interiors. Toys in working spaces, on desks, shelves, hanging from backpacks of people certainly beyond their teenage years. Toys in advertising, in advertising agencies, office toys – for adults. Toys turned to kitchenware, cars, technical appliances with playful aesthetic qualities and vice versa. Erotic toys and toys that had become erotica. Toys in the studios of artists and designers. Designer toys. A lot!

Like if the world had become one giant playground where toys represented a dimension of material culture suddenly exploded in the arenas of the visual, yet ignored (or at least marginalized) in spoken language, let alone theoretical texts. I noticed that adult players were starting to come out of their toy closets. Now would be the time to get up and explore toy play from an adult perspective and underline the fact that mass-produced toys are designed by adults, but produced for players of all ages.



Desire, 2009

Marginal objects in play research

In 1984, Leea Virtanen wrote that the supposed childishness related to play may depend partly on how young people and adults do really not play anymore (1981, 74). However, new games or new types of play may expand or change our previous understanding in unforeseeable ways, writes Arjoranta (2010). In the time of the *ludic turn*, new playthings and new ways of playing are emerging at a rapid pace.

Play can refer to a plethora of individual actions or cultural activities. It can include game play, festivals, artistic play, gambling, and sports. It can be organized, structured, or rule bound (as in games). Or it can be spontaneous, unstructured, and playful as in imaginary or free play (Power, 2011, 289).

The German word “Zeitgeist” or the “spirit of an era” describes the major beliefs and values which formulate a particular outlook of a culture during a specific period of time (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, 4). The current spirit has started to show signs of new understandings of the importance of play but there still remains a task for toy researchers to argue for the importance of toys as playthings for all age groups. This book is one attempt in this direction.

...it is hard to deny that adults are playing. In the U.S.A. the leisure budget for all kinds of entertainment, sports, games, festivals and gambling is about twice the military budget and about 10% of the gross national product. It is the single biggest item in the national budget. So a case can be made that some adults play as much as do some children (Berg et al, 1996, 13).

Play is a central term when discussing toys. Traditionally, play is seen as the work of the child, not the adult. However, play does not limit itself to children: As Arjoranta points out in his study of the multiple meanings of play, ‘everyone from a child to an elderly, from women to men, from performers to contestants and from artist to even researchers may play in their own ways’ (2010, 11).

Object play is only marginally approached in theories of play. This means that playthings are often not discussed apart from briefly mentioning them in connection with theoretical discussions on play. Nevertheless, there is much evidence that material artefacts have deep significance for the players of today.

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Of Toys and Men*, curated by Bruno Girveau (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts de Paris) and Dorothee Chales (Musée des Arts

Décoratifs) and displayed at Helsinki Art Museum Tennis Palace 24.2.–20.5.2012, toys are described as ‘intriguing and nostalgic artefacts that tell tales of the styles of their time, cultural history and customs’ (Tuulikangas, 2012, 7).

As this thesis will suggest, toys do not only belong to childhood nor “childish” activities, but come to have various, important meanings for adults as well. As described in the exhibition text above, the presumption is that toys come to have meaning that extends beyond nostalgia. According to many previous writings on adult engagement with toys, this demographic group either collects old toys or cherishes playthings that have remained as possessions in their material world since childhood.

But the cultural history of toys tells a tale of toy play that has its origins in adult life. For instance, dolls, dolls’ houses and various miniatures have been explained to have been developed as artefacts for adult use. When considering the role of toys in the history of childhood, however, it becomes clear that since the early beginnings of industrial production, toys have been labelled as material artefacts for children.

As Lönnqvist wisely points out, differentiating “real” toys from other artefacts is difficult as many objects have had a double meaning: e.g. dolls have functioned as ritual objects connected with religious purposes and as props in children’s play (Lönnqvist, 1991, 18–19). Today, however, the mass-marketed toys (as representatives of “real toys”) are seen as the most common objects used in children’s play.

Although toys have been seen both as insignificant “trifles” and as important tools that enhance learning, any reading of the history of “play” will quickly show that there is little mention of toys, either in earlier historical times or in cross-cultural studies (Sutton-Smith, 1986).

Play in itself has been examined by researchers from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives. An expansive literature base exists on this phenomenon. However, research on toys and their meanings to society have been addressed to a far lesser extent.

The props, says Lönnqvist (1991, 23), are an essential part of play. In a post-modern, western consumer society, these ‘props’ do, in most cases mean mass-produced toys. As pointed out by anthropologist Minna Ruckenstein, ‘in the wealthier parts of the world mass-produced toys are an unavoidable and indispensable part of the material world’ (2008, 87).

By offering [children] certain playthings and materials, play is directed and shaped by society, claims Hakkarainen (1991, 27). In this way, play culture is produced. A society without toys is a relatively passive, routine society, says Brian Sutton-Smith (*The Psychology of Toys and Play*, 3).

The play world of children is often so multifaceted that a toy only plays a minor part in it (Laatikainen, 2011, 72). One could use a similar argument when discussing play at adult age. Nevertheless, what intrigues myself in the context of this thesis is exactly this interaction between the adult and the toy – the plaything and what is done with it: As adults are known to buy toys for themselves, what are they doing when they *engage in play* with these artefacts?

Toy research, which flourished in Germany in the 1920s was based on studies of collections and focused overall on the cultural history, the aesthetic qualities of objects and the psychology of the toys in primitive societies. A historical-geographical perspective repeats in many studies and exhibitions that focus on singular playthings (Lönnqvist, 1991, 60, 18). What has not been stressed in earlier studies of playthings in relation to adults is *how* they have been used in play. In other words, what kind of playing patterns different toys are connected with. There has perhaps been a strong belief in the work of designers as the planners of toy play patterns – as the indicators of how play with a particular toy should happen. It is general knowledge, however, that people do not always use designed objects as they were originally meant to be used. Through manipulation, artefacts may acquire new uses and in this way, new meanings. The *ideal user* of a toy is thus and simply put anyone, who puts this object *into play*.

Material interests or the desire to fulfil individual needs do not belong in play, claims Bergenhøj (1981, 39). Toy play, on the contrary, and toy play with mass-produced playthings in particular is very much about both material interests, individual play needs and thus, various forms of creative manipulation of toys in which the toy designer has his or her say, but the manufacturer, and ultimately the user/player comes to express ideas that may be somewhat different from what was planned by the designer.

As the outgoing president of ITRA (International Toy Research Association), Cleo Gougoulis pointed out in her welcoming speech at the last ITRA conference held in Bursa, Turkey in the summer of 2011, that we must take the *player perspective* into consideration in contemporary toy research.

The International Toy Research Association encourages toy and plaything research in order to broaden and spread knowledge about toys and promote the development of good toys for children (Smith, 2010, 271). As an ITRA member myself, I would like to enlarge this scope beyond children and to suggest that adults should be considered even more in future studies on toys and the various creative cultures expanding around them. Relations with material things have powerful consequences for human experience, and even for the survival of the species (Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, 21). Object play for example may result in an individual learning how to use tools. Playing with toys may not have conscious goals when considered from the perspective of the player.

Manipulating a tool on the other hand, is considered a skill. Toys, anthropologist Jean-Pierre Rossie explains, are frequently described as objects and not as *instruments of play*. So the play activity is not analyzed with the same care as the toy itself (Rossie, 2005, 14). By taking the perspective of toys as a tool or instrument, it becomes perhaps more interesting to examine its various uses.

Furthermore, mass-produced² toys express ideas about play on many levels. Apart from the relations between the designer and the toy designed, one of these dimensions are the relationships that are established between the child and the toy, the child and the toy-giving adult, the adult and the toy, and finally, the area of interest of this study, namely the adults that bond with both the toy and each other through the toy.

Toys can be regarded as one of the child culture's classical media (Mouritsen, 1999, 61). Therefore, toys have the capacity to communicate meanings about adult desires to control and steer the toy playing child. According to Bo Lönnqvist, a Finnish play scholar, playthings tell a tale of a change in community that again changes the toys of children and their meaning (1981 in Soini, 1991, 9).

Toys and games have generally been regarded as simple and insignificant pastime for children. As Roger Caillois puts it in his *Les jeux et les hommes* (orig. 1958), previous play research has underlined toys and games as unimportant – as 'mere gadgets' as illustrated below:

Researches undertaken on the origin of games and toys merely confirm this first impression that playthings are mere gadgets and games are diverting, and unimportant activities better left to children when adults have found something better to do (Caillois, 2001, 57).

As the editors of the proceedings of the International Toy Research Conference in Halmstad noted in the late twentieth century, toys as cultural artefacts hold importance for both children and adults (Berg et al, 1996, 5). There is a clear shift towards a more 'allowing' take on play with toys, although toy researchers themselves admit that it is still not fully normal for an adult to be engaged in toy play "Most adults look at children's play with toys with a kind of amazement at how they can be preoccupied so well with them, and they also look with amazement at the millions of "strange" adults who still collect toys and presumably still fantasize about them ..." (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 156). As the quote above demonstrates, Brian Sutton-Smith agrees that adults are very

²It should be noted here that mass-production does not automatically mean that the toys produced in volumes would lack uniqueness. For example in the case of the Rubens Barn dolls 'you cannot find any doll identical to another. Your doll will have its personal looks'. See Rubens Barn catalogue 2013.

much an audience for toys as well, although they may be connected with this idea of 'strangeness'. Toy play is, according to many, a childish activity and at adult age, a waste of time.

Nevertheless, as you will see, in this thesis I argue against this proposition. For adults do indeed communicate with toys both as collectibles and as nostalgic objects as sketched by the curators of the aforementioned toy exhibition, but their relationships with toys do not limit themselves to these activities. Instead, as I will argue further, what adults do with toys in contemporary toy cultures are creative and communicative acts that stretch the current understandings of toy play at adult age much further than collecting and preserving old toys.

In order to understand where contemporary toys come from, it is time to look at how various communicational media affect the design and market place of contemporary playthings – in other words to ask how the current world enables design and production of new toys and in that sense, new forms of play.

Joint forces: Toys in the supersystem of play

'Toys bring people together', says Yoav Ziv, toy designer and educator (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). What also seems to describe toys of today is their ability to connect several areas of contemporary culture. Not only does the toy allow people to come together in toy play, but also different dimensions of culture are joined in the toy. What this means in practice is that toy play is greatly affected by the manifold areas of entertainment, art and other forms of (audio) visual culture.

The entertainment industry in all of its forms functions as a major source of inspiration for designers of contemporary playthings. Toys feed on development in other media: current trends in literature, arts, graphic design, comics, movies and fashion affect the stylistic choices made by toy designers. The designs of mainstream, mass-marketed toys created by global giants are, however, dictated by constituents such as age appropriateness, moral values, material preferences, price pressure and suitability in relation to other products in the same category. Companies such as Hasbro and Mattel rely on heavily marketable toys and games often tied to character licenses, or aim at creating 'toyetic' license characters of their own.

Toys are often the bi-product of narratives in (audio)visual stories such as animated television series, cinematic films or literature, comics and other forms of storytelling. According to Dan Flaming, author of *Powerplay. Toys as Popular Culture* (1996, 94)

'toyetic' is the suitability of a media property, such as a movie, for merchandising spin-off lines of licensed toys, games and novelties.

A toy may be based on a known character in popular culture (e.g. Star Wars figurines), or it may represent a character (e.g. Barbie) made famous by the actual toy itself, around which a rich, intertextual web of meanings is built. A toy, in other words, may be based on characters known from literature, films, TV series or comics, namely, a license character e.g. toy figures based on Disney films. However, the development is two-way: sometimes the *transmedia* (see e.g. Jenkins 2010) fantasy (spectacle and/or narrative) world may have its beginnings in one particular toy or a series of toys.³

"In transmedia storytelling, the first chapter of a narrative might be a TV show, the second a film, and the third a video game – much like Pokémon..." (Long, 2007, 12). Marsha Kinder has called this the *entertainment supersystem* (1991, 38, 119).

A toy character may thus simultaneously 'wander' in comics, television, films, literatures and games of different kinds. In the realm of material artefacts but outside the actual sphere of play, toys may through licensing find their way to for example 'back to school' products or fashion articles.

Media has come to have a great impact on toy development and therefore, it is a factor that shapes play culture. 'Play is changing media and media is changing play' (Jenkins, 2010). The allegations towards the play culture of today concern mostly what is described above; its ties to the culture of (industrially produced, commercial) entertainment. What educators in particular, are concerned with is the role of amusement in play: Play scholar Karkama writes in the early 1980s that play is no longer play but amusement. Play (and games) are not personal or self-realization that develops the personality, spontaneous sensuality or collective mimesis. It has changed into a calculated and planned form of amusement (Karkama, 1981, 22–23).

However, as Arjoranta notes, amusingness has been considered a characteristic of play even by philosophical thinkers such as Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1999 in Arjoranta, 2010, 5–6). What is criticized by educators and pedagogues is that play infused with characteristics of entertainment culture will somehow diminish creativity that is an inherent quality of play. We may call this idea of the media-related play cultures, such as the one relating to play with license toys, 'pre-programmed' play.

³ Transmedia storytelling, a term coined by media and fan scholar Henry Jenkins, refers to storytelling that happens across different media. See e.g. Jenkins, Henry (2010), *Toying with Transmedia: The Future of Entertainment is Childs Play*, Sandbox Summit lecture at MIT, May 18th 2010 at MIT WORLD. <http://mitworld.mit.edu>. Also: Long, Jeffrey A. (2007), *Transmedia storytelling. Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company*. Master's Thesis in Comparative Media Studies at MIT, June 2007.

Levin writes about a common fear regarding license-related toys and their assumed ability to decrease creative play:

...the media-linked toys children play with, often highly realistic replicas of what they see on the screen, channel them into trying to imitate scripts from the media, not engage in creative play (Levin, 2010, 21).

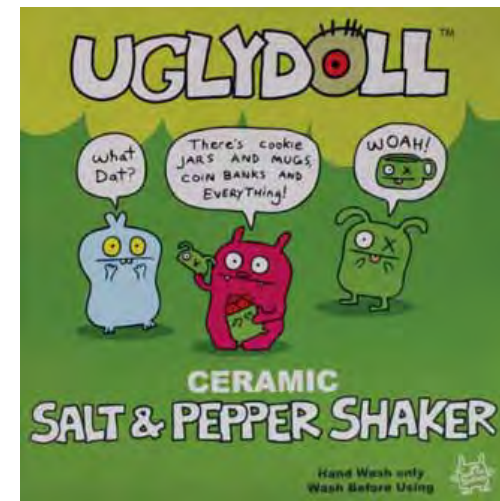
As Levin further explains, it was the deregulation of TV programs that made it legal and possible to market goods directly to children. This led to the massive expansion of licensed, media-linked products that have an effect on what children want to play with. What deregulation led to, furthermore, is a development that persists in toy culture: The best-selling toys are often the ones that are linked to media (Levin, 2010, 16).⁴

As Morency claims, “the longstanding relationship between the toy and entertainment industries has brought countless beloved characters to the playroom...With 26 percent of total industry sales and 2 percent growth in 2011, licensed products are also a vital business component of the U.S. toy industry” (Morency, 2012, 136). Licenses play a massive part in e.g. construction products, with a number of toy lines now being exclusively licensed, tying in with TV shows and movies (*Toys'n'Playthings*, June 2012, Vol. 31, Nr, 9, 26). As we will see, many toy types that are of interest for this study are related to the business of licensing in one way or another.



An abundance of license-related toys at a street market in Seoul, fall 2010.

⁴ I will come back to the discussion about how character-derived, ‘fantastic’ storytelling (fantasy vs. realism) in toys may affect play later on in the thesis.



As one recent example shows, Pretty Ugly, official licensors of the *Uglydoll* brand, a line of characters that are also popular among adult players “is expanding the loveable dolls into a variety of new categories. ...mobile apps...party supplies...backpacks, messenger bags, handbags, totes, cosmetic bags, wallets, coin purses, zipper pulls, lunch bags and luggage. ...fashion headwear...lunch accessories and lunch kits...branded apparel for all ages. ...a unique line of art prints”⁵

Most of the mass-produced toys come from the U.S.A. and Japan where the production and export of images – and toys – are among the world’s highest (Leclerc, 2008). As will be discussed further, other countries such as Central European and Scandinavian countries still have toy production of their own, but a majority of the contemporary western or Japanese societies play with the same toys or at least toys that have been designed with a global audience in mind. Therefore, it is justifiable to point out that also the sources of inspiration such as movies, animations, comics and fashion brands are similarly followed in the biggest toy companies of the world.

⁵ The toy brand in question is also expanding into other audiovisual media and storytelling: Illumination Entertainment chief Chris Meledandri has acquired rights to turn the *Uglydoll* franchise into an animated feature film (“*Uglydoll Gets Pretty Deals*”, www.licensing.com (magazine) June 13, 2012, 22). Also see image for the packaging for the ceramic salt and pepper shaker: “There’s cookie jars and mugs, coinbanks and everything!”.

“Toys are surprising hybrids of reality and illusion. They express the aesthetic preferences, fashions and values of their time, reflecting the societies in which they were created” (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). Toys of today represent the fashion-minded consumer society, the willingness for (constant) change (Lönnqvist, 1991, 17).

All in all, the toy industry is greatly dependent on trends and fashion. However, these do not solely tie toys with what is perceived through the eye. I aim to demonstrate that toys not only belong to the visual, but also the material, popular (fan) and digital (social) dimensions of culture.



Gentlemen playing backgammon in Istanbul, 2011.

There are no rules... But there will be

As Rossie points out, ‘one should remember that there are no toys without games, yet there are games without toys’ (2005, 14). Indeed, toys are not synonymous with play, but in the scope of this thesis, play is a heavily stressed concept utilized by the author as a way understanding these artefacts. Yet, it is always important to recognize the many meanings of play also when considered in the context of toys. For as Karkama notes, play seems, simultaneously to be about both playing [open-ended, free play] and playing games. Therefore we may speak of both theories of play and games, and accentuate one over the other when needed (Karkama, 1981, 15).

Open-ended play when discussed in reference to toys, means that there are infinite possibilities to play with them (Zwiers, 2012).

This thesis starts from the presumption that the toys under scrutiny belong to the realm of open-ended play, but acknowledges that toys – as a separate area of play products as compared to board games and digital games – also may come to mean artefacts which, when used in play, may be regulated by some kind of rules if the players so decide. Play is, however, not naturally competitive, whereas many games are exactly that. Play, in fact, is naturally cooperative (Goldstein, 2012, 15).

Veli-Pekka Rätty argues that play research has been evaluated as underdeveloped even in the 1970s (Rätty, 1998). Fortunately, studies in play (with a particular focus on digital games) have since developed in many ways even in Finland. The research around digital gaming has experienced a fast-paced growth during the past decennium. Game studies have a rather young history as an academic area of study, as this field has developed mainly in the past decade (Sihvonen, 2009, 34)⁶.

According to Crawford and Rutter, digital gaming begun to develop as a leisure industry the late 1970s and 1980s. ‘Although access and experience related to digital gaming vary across demographics, digital gaming has developed into a common leisure practice for a wide range of individuals’ (Crawford & Rutter, 2007, 272).

Games, as rule-based systems of play have in the last decennium therefore been studied significantly more than toys as open-ended playthings. Traditional board games represent a category of their own – one between the physical toy and the digital game. The current rise in the interest in game studies has greatly emphasized computer and video games. Even so, board games still exist and are popular in all age groups. This is clearly of importance when considering the material dimensions of contemporary play culture: People have a need to manipulate materials playfully in offline environments as well (when compared to gaming and play activities online).⁷

According to The Entertainment Software Association, the average age of [digital] gamers is over 30 years now (Schildt, 2011). If games are mostly played by people in their 30s, it makes one wonder if the trend in toy players could be gravitating towards adult age as well.

⁶ Also see Aarseth, Espen, *Computer Game Studies* 1:1, 2001, at <http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

⁷ A recent study on the use of classic and electronic toys in Germany, Great Britain, the U.S.A., South Korea and Brazil, with 2590 participants between 8 and 30 years, reports that 90% of the participants also ‘remain faithful to the classic toys’ ... ‘so the study shows a peaceful coexistence between the forms of play instead of competition between them’. See *Toys 3.0. The Next Generation*. Spielwarenmesse International Toy Fair Nuremberg publication 30.01.–04.02.2013, Press information.



Artwork of the author: **There Are No Rules**, 2011.

Games differ from free form of play – *paidia* – in their rule-based nature. Thus, games belong to the area of ludus, as stated by Caillois (1958). Games, says Sutton-Smith can be distinguished from play by the presence of external rules. But the existence of rules is not a clear-cut criterion to distinguish between play and games (Smith, 2010, 11–12). Playing itself is a rule-making process (Unt, 2012, 106). Actually, as Sotamaa notes, much of the playing of digital games has shifted “from playing by the rules to playing with the rules” (Sotamaa, 2011).

As Arjoranta suggests, one way of underlining the close relationship between [open-ended] play and games is to pay attention to the playful attitude of the (game) player (Arjoranta, 2010, 73). This means that not only toy players may revert to rule-bound play, but the other way around: In playing a game, the rules may be interpreted creatively and not necessarily as the designers have intended.

Unt reminds that both “play and games are manifold concepts that have rich idiomatic and metaphoric usages and are, at the same time, used in professional terminology in various fields” (2012, 104). Therefore, when referring to these concepts, one should always recognize the context in question.

The use of a board game usually starts with the players familiarizing themselves with its rule set. In a digital game, the player often learns the rules – and to play with the rules – amidst playing. A toy, traditionally, seldom guides its user through any rules, or a manual, with the exception of construction toys and so-called *smart toys*, which employ closed play patterns. Digital games, again, thus rely on an exploratory way of playing, and are as a result often learned through play. The theoretical clues about how to play with a toy need to be looked for elsewhere. In my understanding it is a question of the potential that has been designed into a toy, i.e. its *affordances*.⁸

Bringing up games in the introductory chapter of this thesis has to do with the observation I have made while I have been working in the toy industry. A blurring of boundaries between games and toys has occurred more clearly in the past few years: I have started to see more and more game-specific elements in e.g. soft toys that have usually represented a play pattern suggesting open-ended play. Board games, and especially children’s board games, whenever manifesting in a three dimensional form, have because of their form and sometime mechanics, a *toyish* nature that allows toy-like play.⁹

This means that the players are free to manipulate the board game in any way they wish, in order to create a playful experience. Again, by familiarizing myself with game studies of the past years, a similarly increasing ‘toyishness’ has become notable in digital games. Gamers are constantly abandoning rule-bound play and creating new ways to engage with the games. More importantly, some digital games are being converted into creative tools that the players use as they wish, probably even far beyond what the game designers ever imagined. In many cases this means a development in game culture which has extended from pure entertainment and the tricky, but often mentioned element of fun to productive forms of gameplay. One example of these activities is the one of ‘modding’ as discussed i.e. by Sihvonen (2009) and Sotamaa (2009). At the same time two major developments characterize the development and play(fulness) around toys and games. Hybrids of toyish games are designed, while toys are being played with socially in ways that are reminiscent of rule-bound play. Furthermore, a casual attitude towards gaming reminds us of the nature of unstructured i.e. free or open-ended toy play.

⁸ The concept of affordances will be elaborated on further in the thesis.

⁹ Also, I have designed a board game for children named *Raccoon Wash Rush* (published in 2008), that encourages toy-play-like activities such as dressing the raccoon kits (card board playing pieces) in textile T-shirts during gameplay. In this way, the game pieces come to afford paper doll-like play patterns.

As Pesce already noted in 2000, 'the insubstantial world of cyberspace and the world of real objects are beginning to intersect and influence one another' (2000, 232).¹⁰ The 'gamification' of toys¹¹ and at the same time, the *toyishness of* (digital and physical) gaming may well be central branches of development of the age of the ludic turn.

According to the organizers of Spielwarenmesse International Toy Fair Nuremberg, digital media look set to assume a lasting place in the toy industry; 'classic and digital play ideas merge to become the toys of tomorrow'. Technological features in playthings as well as digital toys are believed to be here to stay and the current mindset seems to support the idea that 'iToys' do not pose a threat, but should instead be seen as a complement to classical toys.¹² Furthermore, it must be noted here that digitally enhanced toys may also be played with in more traditional ways (Goldstein, 2012, 3).

From the viewpoint of toy play, the following statement holds true: "When man plays he must intermingle with things and people" (Erikson, 1973, 205). When things – including toys – and other people are involved in play, rules will inevitably be created. In other words, the human being is at the same time both *homo sapiens* and *homo faber* and *homo ludens*, s/he is at the same time a knowing and playing being (Karkama, 1981, 16).¹³

This thesis is not a study in the field of (digital) gaming. Nevertheless, the manifold developments that game cultures and studies of them have taken in the past years provide an interesting reference point to studies conducted in the field of toy research. As this study is concerned with both toys and toy players, game studies (even though in many previous cases dealing with digital technologies instead of material culture) is an academic resource which I have consulted at times when similar research has been hard to find in the field of toys.

¹⁰ Skylanders, the No. 1 bestselling kids videogame of 2011 represents one of these hybrid products where toys have been integrally included in the original game ("Skylanders Takes Off into Publishing", www.licensing.com, June 12, 2012, 6).

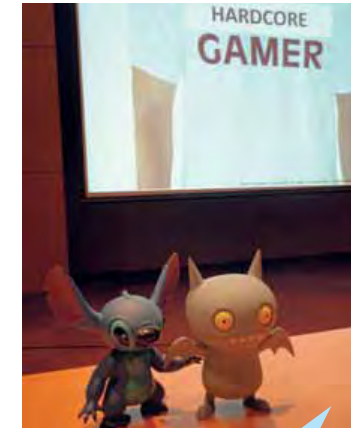
¹¹ I am suggesting here that the gamification of toys means that game-specific (digital) elements are integrated in 'smart' toys. The capability of these toys is not only based on the fact that they, through interactive engagement with the player not only 'keep them company' with him or her, but also educate the player through rule-bound interaction.

¹² Also see "Evolution, not revolution" in *Play it! The Global Toy Magazine, Spielwarenmesse International Toy fair Nürnberg publication* 30.01-04.02.2013 and "International Toy fair 2013 shows the future of playing: classic and digital too", *Spielwarenmesse International Toy Fair Nürnberg publication*, 30.01.-04.02.2013, Press information.

¹³ Furthermore, in his studies on game design and game play, Aki Järvinen has added *homo aestheticus-informaticus* on this axis. See Järvinen (1999) "Digitaalset pelit ja pelikulttuurit" [Digital games and game cultures] in Järvinen, Aki & Mäyrä, Ilkka (Eds.), *Johdatus digitaaliseen kulttuuriin* [An introduction to digital culture], Vastapaino Tampere, 165-184. Moreover, Sam Inkinen (2006) writes about the creative human in Inkinen, Sam (2006) "Homo Creativus. Havaintoja eräistä aikalaiskäsitteistä sekä luovuuden mysteereistä" [Homo Creativus. Observations of some contemporary conceptions and the mysteries of creativity] in Inkinen et al. (2006) *Minne matka luova talous? [Where are you heading, creative economy?]*, Rajalla, 15-51.



Adults playing at a Pachinko parlour in Tokyo, 2009.



Toys of (and traveling with) the author at a design conference in Seoul, 2010.

On the other hand, game studies also widely acknowledge, employ (and debate) classic theories of play such as the ones by Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith, to name a few. Perhaps then it is not wrong to think that a study on contemporary toys, toy cultures and toy players may share knowledge already produced in the emerging and multidisciplinary field of game studies.

Digital games have a long history that extends to the realm of the first technologically advanced toys. An *automaton* refers to a self-moving machine, a popular toy type that predicted the category of techno-toys of today. In 1823, Johann Maelzel (inventor of the metronome) patented the first talking doll in 1823: it said "Mama" and "Papa" (Tiffany, 2000, 58). In the age of so-called 'smart toys', a child should be exposed to both open-ended, imaginative play and the more structured play pattern of a technology toy, say Szymanski and Neuborne (2004, 107). Intriguing as these techno-toys of today are, I have, however, decided to leave technologically enhanced toys outside of my analysis of contemporary playthings.

In a time when the boundaries of (digital) games and toys are continuing to blur, some toys may still be considered as completely open-ended artefacts, at least when it comes to their material dimensions.

As reported in the *Toys'n'Playthings* magazine in summer 2012, the construction toy category is one of the few categories that has maintained its position in the market, 'without delving into the technological advancements that are heavily laden in a number of other categories' (*Toys'n'Playthings*, June 2012, Vol. 31, Nr, 9, 26).

Some dolls, soft toys and action figures may still be quite limited in the ways they can be manipulated materially, for example through posing. Nevertheless, these toys do not include buttons or screens that connect directly to new technologies. The packaging they come in does not guide their use in similar ways as the instructions for a 'techno-toy' would do. Their 'wow' effect is the result of something else. Quite often this 'wow' is linked to a story – created by the designer or manufacturer of the toy, or alternatively, its player. This thesis honours these toys, and at the same time questions their power to wow their audience, as well as their ability to lure the player to release the playful potential – in other words, to create experiences of wow, flow and glow through actualizing of affordances. Furthermore, it investigates the relationship that these toys have in time and space, online and offline, and in terms of identity work of the players. It is important to note here that play with these non-technological, maybe more 'traditional' (but not necessarily conventional) toys does not exclude the use of technologies when communicating with fellow players. The contemporary toy is seen from this viewpoint not altogether an artefact used for "non-digital fun".

The first chapter of this thesis continues in the following with an introduction to the theoretical framework employed in laying a foundation to the study. Moreover, I will present the research questions, a preliminary hypothesis and will go on to describe the aims of the study.

Theoretical background

In the realm of philosophy, the process of interpreting and understanding texts and works of art is called 'hermeneutics'. My research follows traditions of social hermeneutics by aiming at an understanding of the phenomenon under study by an interpretative process that involves personal experience, interpretation and reflection of the phenomenon that adult toy play is. According to Pullinen, a hermeneutical attitude means openness and readiness to learn and to expose ones own ideas in a dialogue with the ideas of others (Pullinen, 2003, 9). The aim of social hermeneutics is to through an analysis gain knowledge about what kind of meanings the social events of human beings have to them and their culture. In the light of this study, the hermeneutical attitude means that I am trying to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of adult toy play as a

whole, by inspecting and analysing the practices conducted as a part of this behavioural framework. In order to do this, I have undergone a process aiming at creating a holistic understanding of a world-view on toys, play, adulthood and the emerging play practices of adults in contemporary toy cultures.

The theoretical background of this thesis is built upon the idea of *triangulation*, which means that the phenomena under study are approached from multi-theoretical perspectives. Furthermore in triangulation, the researcher may use more than one source of data (see for example Jokinen, 2008, 245).

This thesis is mostly indebted to theories of play. However, as play theories for the most part deal with non-material play, I have chosen to complement the choice of theories with ideas borrowed from other disciplines. Different theoretical perspectives enrich the understanding of the phenomenon, which does not limit itself to academic research on play or even toys, but at the same time both to many other disciplines and to several areas of culture.

Toy design educator at Delft University of Technology, toy and game designer Mathieu Gielen has said that toy designers almost need to be amateur psychologists in order to understand what it takes to design for play. What this means is that the one aiming to design a playful experience through a toy must understand player behaviour.

Toys encourage particular forms of play and social interaction, notes anthropologist Minna Ruckenstein. Yet, she adds, only a few researchers have explored the ways in which toys propose certain actions (Ruckenstein, 2011, 1).

As Lönnqvist points out, the direction in studies concerned with playthings has been to place the "insignificant" toy in a wider context as a proof of cultural stance towards this group of objects and at the same time, to underline its significance as a tool in play situations (1991, 20). My thesis tries to take these ideas further by showing that with all their potential, contemporary toys do not deserve the position of mere insignificant artefacts, but as things that encourage and invite their users to play actively, creatively, productively and socially.

In order to understand play that happens with toys (object play, material play) one must have an idea about human motivations to interact with artefacts in general. Moreover, when this interaction supposedly happens with the user's 'playful attitude' towards a 'playful object' in mind, one must firstly understand the nature of this attitude and secondly, what it means to interact with an artefact that is considered a non-utensil outside of the sphere of play.

Play cultures have interested folklorists, ethnologists or cultural anthropologists. *Homo ludens* has been the subject of study even in academic realms such as pedagogy, psychology, philosophy and art research (Laaksonen, 1981b, 7).

In Finland, research on toys or toy play has been rare compared to research on traditional forms of play such as free-form and outdoor play without engagement with commercially produced playthings. To be informed about the research conducted by the international toy research community is therefore a necessity. On a grander scale, the toy research tradition is a coarse combination of findings from studies in fields such as the educational sciences and folklore. One of the strongest research traditions in the realm of play focuses on learning.¹⁴

As literature and studies on toy play are rather scarce, I have tried to use an innovative approach in terms of choosing and leaning on previous writings on material (popular) culture and design theory. As I have chosen to concentrate on contemporary playthings, the cultural history of toys is tackled only briefly in the introductory part of the thesis. I am trying to use this knowledge to build a base for reflecting upon the current developments around toys as they are understood today – as artefacts mostly connected to childhood, compared to their past (and original) status as adult entertainment.

The spirit of play is essential to culture, but games and toys are historically the residents of culture (Caillois, 1961, 58). What this means is that play itself is in a constant state of flux, but the playthings will remain to tell about play that happened in history. Much has been written on toys and the culture surrounding them as material, and particularly educational (children's toys) or collected objects (old/antique toys) alone, but according to my understanding, toy players still create an area of research that seems to be left surprisingly out of focus when we consider the multiple meanings a toy may have in a person's life alone.

Play research conducted in Finland before 1980s falls in between academic realms, mostly ethnology and folkloristics (Laaksonen, 1981b, 7). Children's toy play activities have been explored to some degree for instance in the fields of folklore and anthropology, but similar activities at a mature age have in the light of a vast literary review been widely overlooked, if not completely ignored. So, in this thesis, the focus shifts first from what contemporary toys are to another perspective – the cultures of toy play. A second shift gravitates towards the players' perspective. In other words, the areas of interest in the light of this thesis are threefold: *Toy play*, *toy cultures* and *toy players*. More importantly, the study tries to clarify the ways in which the toy and its player, the product and person, become intertwined and how the principles of adult toy play manifest in contemporary toy cultures.

¹⁴ One of the exceptions is Marjatta Kalliala's thesis examining the change of play culture in Finnish kindergartens. See Kalliala, Marjatta (1999) *Enkeliprinsessa ja itsari liukumässä. Leikkikulttuuri ja yhteiskunnan muutos*. [The Angel Princess and Suicide in a Slide. Play culture and change in society] Gaudeamus Yliopistokustannus University Press Finland.



Russell Nye suggests different ways of looking at popular culture, one of which focuses on the basis of how it is used (2006, 28–29). As stated in the research question further, the interest is both on the artefact and its user – in the toy and the player. When studying toy play, it is necessary to discuss both the artefact and the user. For the thing meant for play only becomes a plaything – a toy – when *played* with. In contemporary western society, the developments point to that consumers are becoming more and more interested in the origins of a product and thus want to know not only where and when the product was produced, but also in who designed it. In the case of playthings and particularly in the category of games (both traditional and digital), players are often aware of the person responsible for the invention of the idea – sometimes even the design work. In toys, the design community has been much less acknowledged outside of the ‘inside’ of the industry, but there is clearly a growing interest towards the designers as some new toys are reaching a status of design objects. Because of this development, I want in the framework of this study also to shed light on the toy industry, and more particularly on toy designers.

According to Laaksonen (1981b, 7), as compared to other areas of research of folk tradition, there are many poorly documented realms within play research. One reason for this may have been that previously studies of play have not been considered as serious topics of research. Finnish Aili Helenius wrote already in 1991 that it is hard to get public support for this field of study (1991, 124). Thankfully, the situation has changed as we have entered an era that seems to value play(fulness) more. Following Marshall’s idea, this may have to do with the developments that have occurred in media cultures: ‘In new media cultures, play has moved centre-stage in its significance in the creative forms of production and recreation’ (Marshall, 2004, 43–44).

Play is without “why”, writes Nachmanovitz (1990, 45). Yet it is an interesting question, *why play happens*, what motivates it and why it has taken a centre-stage position, as described in the earlier passage. Even more interesting is to ask *how play happens*, and to narrow down the question, to ask: How does adult toy play happen in contemporary cultures of play?

Hypothetically, one might begin to respond by resorting to earlier writings on play with some help from Brian Sutton-Smith who lists progress as the first of the seven rhetorics of play. For, according to play scholars such as Vygotsky, Erikson and Piaget, the child plays in order to adapt, grow and socialize in and with the world (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Toys, in their very concrete form support these developmental and hence educational aspects of play.

According to play scholar Hannu Soini, common lines of thinking rather see play as developmental or as harmful. For researchers, he says, it is quite hard to join in

this discussion, which as a matter of fact both simplifies play and underestimates its significance in understanding human behaviour. I tend to agree with Soini, who continues by saying that play is not valued per se, but only for its instrumental value (Soini, 1991, 14). In my thinking, the motivations for toy play must be examined from other possible angles such as motivations stemming from the emotional and creative aspects of relationships with toys.

The ideas of play as either a developmental activity or as an enjoyable hobby during leisure time do not explain adult toy play fully as a phenomenon. Instead, we must dig deeper to grasp at least some kind of understanding of how adult toy play happens, to understand its nature in the contemporary world.

Another hypothetical take on toy play is then the rhetoric of self, which focuses on the player experience seeing play as a peak experience – *flow* – as explained by Csikszentmihalyi and stresses leisure time, solitariness and extreme games as forms of play as a source of enjoyment. What role might a toy have in this rhetoric?

Research questions and hypothesis

When considering ‘adult toys’, the product groups that usually top the list are erotic toys, technological appliances, miniatures, hi-fi, the car industry – even kitchenware. Moreover, a nostalgic attitude validates the cultivation and collecting of old toys. Regardless, both theories and the more popular readings on play do not recognize adult play with contemporary playthings per se, but shun it as a nondescript element among the various activities of hobbyists.

The aim of this study is deepen the understanding of object play at adult age. In other words, the thesis aims at answering the following questions:

1. *How are adults using contemporary toys today?*
2. *What can (toy) designers learn from this?*

Richard Schechner suggests (1988, 3) that play acts may be analyzed according to six basic templates: structure, process, experience, function, ideology, and frame. This study focuses primarily on the following three: Firstly, *experience: What are the feelings or moods of the players towards their playthings and how is toy play remembered as a lived experience?*



Left behind, 2012

Secondly, *function*: What purpose or purposes do play acts involving toys, serve, i.e. what motivates toy play from the perspectives of the industry and the 'toying artists' and on the other hand, the 'everyday' players themselves?

And, finally, *frame*: How do the players know how, when and where a play act begins, is taking place, and is over i.e. where, when and how does adult toy play as an activity emerge?

As the questions show, the interest targets the phenomenon by asking what kind of ludic engagement happens, when adults interact with toys through design, artistic work and 'everyday' play and on the other hand, how this new understanding of toy play can be utilized in future toy design processes.

My premise is that *adults are showing increased interest in playful activities around toys and that these ludic practices have become particularly perceivable through the development of the 'playgrounds' of social media*. In other words, adults cannot any longer be categorized as mere hobbyists and collectors in toy culture but more often as actual *toy players*, representatives of *homo ludens*.

Thus, adult play no longer becomes visible exclusively through activities in the realms of gaming, art or sports, but also through the creative and interactive toy play on the playgrounds of the visual, material, design, fan cultures and social media. Moreover, in its many forms adult toy play also presents itself as a creative and productive activity.

The Peter Pan syndrome, the so-called infantilization of culture and a phenomenon called KGOY (Kids Growing Older Younger) – also known as *age compression* – have been highlighted as anxieties both on the arenas of sociology and the toy industry. As children grow and develop faster beyond the reach of toy companies, adults are, in my thinking, reciprocally forming an even more significant group of buyers and consumers for contemporary playthings.¹⁵

¹⁵ At the time of writing the final version of this thesis I have already witnessed one industry-related event, which identified and underlined the phenomenon of adult toy play on the level of using it as a conference theme. I visited the Hong Kong Toy Fair as an invited speaker to give a presentation on the subject. See *HKTDC Hong Kong Toys & Games fair publication Fair Daily*, Issue 2, Tuesday, 8th of January 2013, "Product Development and Opportunities of Kidult Toys": "Toys are strongly associated with children but adults, in increasing numbers, want to play too. The trend towards "Kidult" play presents the toy industry with opportunities of historic proportions."

Structure of the monograph

As the study aims to create a sectional view of a complex phenomenon of our time, I have decided to follow the structure of a traditional monograph thesis instead of an article-based one. The rationale behind this choice is my personal wish to through my research present as wide and multifaceted a view of the principles of contemporary adult toy play. This is done by presenting a thread that flows logically across the tentative research questions and then through the methodological decisions on to the theoretical background, followed by the empirical part and analysis of the research material in order to finally arrive at conclusions of the findings and a discussion of them.

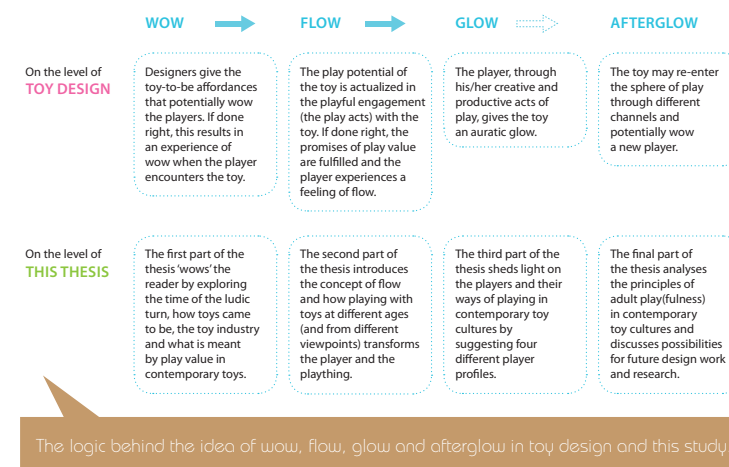
The methodological palette again, represents a multifaceted and perhaps even unconventional (even debatable) set of mixed methods and exploratory courses that I have composed in quite a playful manner. These will be explained in the next chapter.

The study is constructed in the following way: First, I will clarify how the concepts of toys, play, adulthood and the toy playing adult are employed in this work. After laying the theoretical framework based on a discussion between previous writings and my own arguments based on observations in the fields of the toy industry and material and visual culture on a more general level, I move on to study in closer detail *where*, *when*, *how* and *why* toy play happens. In the next part I approach the players themselves, by answering the question of *who*. This part of the thesis attempts to establish more detailed profiles of adult toy players by a categorizing of their activities in the realms of art, design and ‘everyday’ play. In the last two chapters of this book, I will conclude by making an overview of the principles of adult play in contemporary toy cultures and finally, discuss how the findings of this study might shed light on new research questions and actual design work. It is essential to produce more knowledge of how adults are releasing and thus actualizing the playful potential of toys through their interaction with these artefacts. Future toy researchers and toy designers play a significant role in exploring and making use of these relationships further.

I have divided the monograph into an introductory section and three central parts. The idea behind dividing the book into parts I have decided to name ‘Wow’, ‘Flow’ and ‘Glow’ resonates with the different stages of the lifecycle of a toy. If a toy succeeds in enthralling its potential player, it has managed to create an experience that many of us recognize as a *wow experience*. Toys become objects of desire because of their capacity to wow. A well designed toy preserves its wow beyond the first encounter with the player. In sustainable toy relationships the wow element in the plaything dissolves into *flow*, a situation where the potential playfulness of the toy is successfully released by the player again resulting in a pleasant experience in which time and space lose their meaning to

the person at play. Flow may be described as something that occurs while the toy has successfully managed to fulfil its core function – to tempt the player into manipulating it. What the players then may add as value to the toy in their play activities, is according to the philosophy of this thesis, *glow*. The last phase in the lifecycle of a toy before it comes to its end through disposal, or alternatively, starts afresh again by ‘wowing’ a new player, is described by a kind of *afterglow* that makes the owner of the toy cherish the artefact by keeping it clean and well-preserved, perhaps as a decorative item in a home. Thus, the process from wow to flow to glow and then afterglow, when successfully realized in a toy, describes an ideal situation that toy designers should strive for when endeavouring to create a sustainable toy experience.

In parallel, the aim of this thesis may also be seen to have a similar interest: First to wow its reader, then to create an experience of flow and lastly, to leave the reader with an idea of a glowing reading experience, which will not fade away as soon as the last page is turned. Lastly, I wish the story of my research process to give an afterglow, which will hopefully spark ideas for further research. This is why I have chosen to name the last chapters of the thesis, consisting of two parts, the ‘afterglow’ section.



The research process, as clarified in the following chapter, begins with the introduction of the methodological considerations behind the thesis. The multidisciplinary approach to the research project as well as employing the idea of triangulation, means choosing and mixing multiple methods that will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

After presenting the process of collecting and characteristics of the research data, I move on to present the outline of the study and by doing so argue for the choice of limiting myself to three categories of contemporary toys with a face, namely dolls, soft toys and action figures.

In Chapter 3 I will define the concepts of 'toy', 'play value' and the 'good toy' as understood in the previous writings this thesis utilizes. The section dedicated to the definition of a toy begins with a brief history of playthings in order to clarify the developments that have led to the emergence of the contemporary toy. Toys are discussed here mainly from the viewpoints of design work, mass-production and the toy industry. Moreover, I will bring up the concept of affordance in relation to toy design into my argumentation.

Chapter 4 presents the new toy as an artefact that is concisely tied with the concept of 'wow-ness'. Here, different dimensions of play value will be considered by highlighting the elements of wow in new times and new toys. What follows opens up the empirical consideration of the Flow part of the thesis: Next, in Chapter 5, I will go on to discuss how this thesis approaches the concepts of 'play' and 'playfulness'. The central theories that I will use to explore the possible theoretical dimensions of toy play are briefly introduced. Lastly, another important concept, namely adulthood, is examined more closely among other things through the recent and debated developments around the supposed infantilization of culture and the relation between toys and the idea of prolonged childhood.

The final section of this chapter examines the encounter between the toy playing adult and the contemporary toy. It aims to further investigate how so-called designer toys have challenged the traditional toy market and by doing so, expanded and even opened up new audiences for toys. From a brief analysis of new playthings for the adult audience, I will take the reader to where contemporary toy play happens: the territories and realms that constitute multiple playgrounds.

Chapter 6 will introduce the places of play and performance with a description of the intersection between different cultures involved in toy play. This part of the thesis thus contextualises the cultures of toy play in the realms of the material, popular, fan, visual, digital, social and design cultures. Chapter 7 concentrates first on toys as spatial objects by comparing the markets of adult and children's toys, and secondly, discusses the playgrounds of toy play both online and offline, inside and out – in the intimate environment of the home, traveling and in the working space.



Chapter 8 brings up the questions related to toys and temporality; toys as time machines, as devices of nostalgia, the allure of 'retro', and toys as products of leisure vs. working time (serious play). Furthermore, it investigates in more detail the lifecycles of toys as material and remembered artefacts and in this way, lays a groundwork for the proposed glow in toys.

Toying with identities and dimensions of the playing self are explored in Chapter 9. This chapter further elaborates the bonding that happens with toys and discusses the capacity of toys to offer possibilities to identify with the toy character. Back stories of toys from the viewpoint of facial features, gender and personality will be discussed in more detail. The chapter concludes with an elaboration of toys' capability to function as avatars for their player.

Chapter 10 introduces the glow part of the thesis by profiling four different principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures, by examining more closely how toy play happens in the realms of art, design, collecting and creative, productive play. I present here four types of toy players; The Collecting Hobbyist, Artist Toying, Designer at Play and The Productive (Dis-)Player.

The final part of this thesis is presented under the topic 'Afterglow'. Chapter 11 summarizes the findings of the study and presents novel ways to define the contemporary toy and to consider the ways contemporary players are toying with playthings of today. Moreover, I will suggest that an adult playing with toys today more and more shifts away from traditionally acknowledged *caring* of the toys to *sharing* them with other players on the playgrounds of fan cultures and social media. Last, in Chapter 12, I am toying with the idea of a final fantasy regarding the future of adult toy play by discussing further suggestions for research and what designing for future playful experiences could mean when considering adults as a growing audience for toys.

RESEARCH PROCESS: A multidisciplinary approach towards the contemporary cultures of adult toy play



MIKÄ ON SINUN LELUSI TARINA?



Perjantaina 15.5 Taideteollisen Korkeakoulun tiloissa Kauppahallissa vietetään aikuisten lelupäivää. Lelututkija Kati Heljakka kutsuu kaikki halukkaat porilaiset saapumaan paikalle lelunsa kanssa. Lelut kuvataan omistajiensa tai muiden leluesineiden kanssa myöhemmin tilassa esitettävää näyttelyä varten. Lelututkija on myös innokas kuulemaan ja kirjaamaan ylös leluun liittyviä tarinoita. Kaikilla meillä on rakkaita leluesineitä. Mikä on sinun lelusi tarina?

Tapahtuma järjestetään perjantaina
15.5 klo 9–17.

TERVETULOA, LEIKKISÄT AIKUISET

Poster for Adult Toy Day, 2009

Chapter 2: Methodological considerations

This thesis is a journey through the multidisciplinary playgrounds of adult toy play, that seeks a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of adult play with contemporary toys. The mode of experience in which the thesis is interested is therefore the *experience of toy play*. It is an attempt to understand how adults approach, bond with and actively interact with toys. Thus, it investigates a multilayered phenomenon and by doing so opens novel views on the playful activities of adults with artefacts that are designed with a playful attitude in mind and that are referred to as toys.

The chapter begins by presenting the design and the research space for the study – in other words the contextual framework in terms of research material and methodological considerations. In the following, I will start by elaborating on how the study attempts to serve its primary audience, toy design practitioners and the discipline of design. I continue by defining the multidisciplinary framework of my study and present techniques for gathering empirical data. Further, I will go on to clarify reasons for data collection, discuss the methods for analyzing the materials and characterise the research process as an activity that parallels play and that positions myself as a player.

Good research practice demands that a researcher makes her potential biases clear. It is therefore appropriate to note my position not only as a toy researcher, but also a toy fan, toy player and someone toying with art. Additionally, it is appropriate to address that I have worked in the toy industry all my life: To quote Michael Kohner, a licensing agent who was one of the first “toy people” I learnt to know in the toy industry: “I was raised in the business. It is in my blood” (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 110).

‘Sure, lots of people dream’, say toy industry professionals Levy and Weingartner, ‘but toy creators spend time with their dreams’ (2003, 5). Being involved in the toy industry from an early age has allowed me to continue this dreaming. How I see the dreaming to manifest in the work of a designer, is in the way the profession requires from the designer the ability to envision play. One cannot design a toy/for play without understanding the motivations behind (and joy of) toy play.

When a practitioner becomes a researcher into his own practice, Schön points out, he engages in a continuing process of self-education (1983, 299). In play, artefacts, environments and even ways of thinking are potentially changed through exploration and manipulation. In a way, I have taken a similar stand in this thesis, as if it were a prototype that one may have playful interaction with. Thus, I have learned from both previous texts and from the work in progress. Following design scholar Kees Dorst, “From the outside, design is a strange profession – the creation of novel things by means of an incredibly messy process that is hard to control and difficult to rely on” (2006, 79).

The analogy of the research process as having similar qualities compared to the design profession are obvious;

...design can indeed be seen as learning: as a designer, you gradually gather knowledge about the nature of the design problem and the best routes to take towards a design solution. You do this by trying out different ways of looking at the problem, and experimenting with various solution directions. You propose, experiment, and learn from the results, until you arrive at a satisfactory result (Dorst, 2006, 16).

Research (for) design

As one of my interviewee's puts it, design is the best place to look, the best observation place to look at society nowadays (TD/rl). The study at hand contributes to the (toy) design discipline by offering a novel approach to toys as playful artefacts for players of all ages. The idea is that the work will first and foremost contribute to the knowledge creation in the fields of toy (play) research and toy design. According to Yiu-Cheung Shiu at Toy Design Education in Hong Kong some difficulty has been experienced in teaching toy design because there are no text books particularly written about this area of design (Shiu, 2008). Therefore, I am firstly writing to an audience that has suffered from a lack of accurate literature in their field of practice – toy design students and toy designers. Secondly, by reporting on my study, I wish to contribute to the realm of toy research.¹⁶

This thesis is not a direct guidebook on how to create the perfect toy. Instead, I am aiming at presenting a more holistic view on the contemporary toy cultures by bringing together a variety of perspectives on adult toy play; cross-cultural evidence of its existence and characteristics and by doing so, deepening the understanding of the activities of the end-users of toys – the players.

Teemu Taira writes that ideas about contemporary academic research are motivated through the thought of having an effect on things. Research thus becomes an intervention, an inference in our own time. All types of research may be interventional, but a diagnosis of the contemporaries (*Zeitdiagnose*) often builds intentionally on this idea (2008, 231). The *Zeitgeist*, or 'the spirit of the age' may have an effect on toy designers, as designers

¹⁶ For example, a book titled *Toy Design* seemed a promising reference considering my topic. However, when acquiring this book it soon occurred to me that the agenda of the work concentrated on illustrating outcomes of past toy design work, presenting their designers and not theoretical tools applicable for actual toy design work. See van Uffelen, Chris (2010) *Toy Design*, Braun Publishing AG.

in general. Ideas for design work have their beginnings in several areas of culture and are most affected by 'what happens in the world':

KH: Where do you get new [toy] ideas from?

Interviewee: The *Zeitgeist*. No, from lot's of exposure and I do believe in inspiration, it's mystical... I sort of have a thing that I don't believe when you say "I have this idea". Or "It's my idea". Or "You stole my idea". It wasn't your idea to begin with. ... people sort of observe, if we know that the idea is really if you open yourself up to what's happening in the world a lot more is that the idea picks you. You, at the right time, your obligation is to pull it down and then remove it. And the only thing that you should be doing is not thinking that it's not like generated inside you. That's a whole philosophy and that the inspiration comes from a lot of things you are observing, but that really is almost like if you've never had that, once that idea hits you, that your obligation is to that you and maybe a few other people were picked for that one. ... It think that's the joy that happens. Otherwise it feels forced. If you're trying to force it from inside you, then I don't think that it's ever going to be the same. (TD/dk)

The key talent of designers according to Crossley, is to have deep empathy for the people they design for (2003, 45). As I have been 'designing' and conducting this research, I have tried to keep the (toy) design community in mind. As already stated, toy research is scarce and a diagnosis of the contemporaries, as described by Taira above, may have an effect on how future design work is carried out in the industry of mass-produced toys. According to Vihma, design studies may be grouped in many ways: "They can examine the designer, the design method or the outcome, for example, a material product" (1995, 13). As this thesis employs multiple views on toys as a category of products and on the other hand, on adults as toy players, it aims to offer a wider perspective on a phenomenon that that should not be cropped in order to fit just one area of design-related studies. Instead, I wish to include the role of the toy designer and highlight some examples of the possible outcomes of toy design work in the framework of the study. By doing so, I am aiming to give a voice to a product category (toys) that has not earlier been acknowledged as artefacts that are used in as manifold, creative and productive ways (play practices) of mature users (adults).

By addressing the *affordances* (of the toys as designed artefacts), *places of play performances* i.e. the contemporary playgrounds in culture and *activities of the players* – both the toy designers and players, I wish to contribute to the knowledge base of the toy designers and at the same time point out possible directions that may be followed

in future design work. I assume that by giving the toys of the future more of the ‘wow’; qualities that will last over time, qualities that encourage various forms of manipulation of the toy and eventually, a possibility to reduce waste when the toy comes to the end of its lifecycle, the toy design of tomorrow would represent an improvement on the current situation. Ultimately, the goal is thus to develop this understanding so that more sustainable relationships between toys and players could be formed, and that toys would again be consciously designed so that they can either be recycled from player to player, or so that their raw material can be utilized more easily in the production of either new toys or other artefacts.

Designer at play

Whoever wants to understand much must play much.
- Gottfried Benn. German physician (1886–1956)

Several writings of play acknowledge the serious side of play, addressing either its cognitive benefits or its sometimes emerging productive nature. The notion of play as a serious activity further supports the comparison between research and play. However, as play seldom is a completely serious activity, having a playful attitude has not only served the author in serious ways. Being playful has meant for me fearlessness in taking the role of player myself. So in this case, I have not only functioned as a researcher *of* play, but a researcher *at* play.

The process may be very messy, very wicked, but somewhere there, there's a few chronological or logical steps you can refer to, you know, I mean the understanding of a brief, analyzing, coming with a return brief, you know mindmapping, your scope, the scope of a project, all this, right. If it's somehow a logical process you need eventually to appreciate if you want to communicate what you're going through. Your process may be very messy, very wicked, ... and so we're working on this and we call it design play. (TD/rl)

Design researcher Gabriela Goldschmidt has said that we must treat research as a design task, and be creative about how we carry out our research (Goldschmidt, 2010, 32–33). Playful curiosity is one motivation for creativity (Maher, 2011, 44). Creativity, again, has been a prerequisite for crafting the research design for my study. On a metalevel, the research process in general can be seen to have a playful quality due to its exploratory nature.

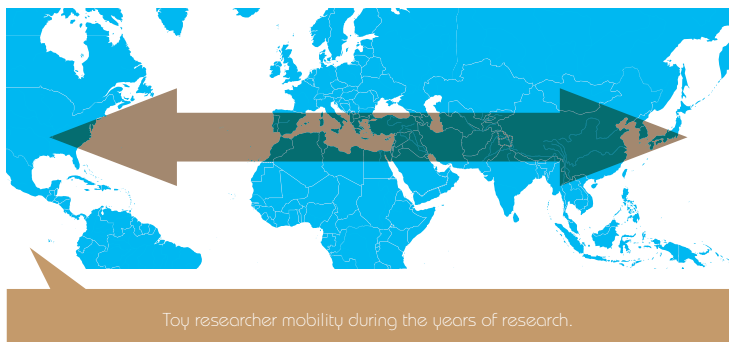
An open-minded attitude opens up new paths: Design researcher Kees Dorst advises designers to ‘strive to always do things that are new to you, irrespectively of the novelty-value they might have for the rest of the world’ (Dorst, 2006, 50). How I have followed this advise is by attempting to apply novel ideas especially in designing the study.

Dorst also writes of design as a game with very few rules (2006, 19). Design research, or rather, the *designing* of the research can then be seen as a form of play. To conduct a thesis in the realm of adult play requires a playful attitude from the researcher. ‘In order to understand play, one must remember the feeling of play’ (Brown, 2008). Even better, the researcher of play should immerse oneself in playful experiences.

Designers may opt for role immersion. In that case, they create an understanding of the users’ world by entering it “as a user” rather than being just an observer (Koskinen et al, 2003, 47). This is not a way to re-create another individual’s experience, but a possibility for the researcher to learn from her own experiences. Thus, I have not only resorted to personal memories of play, but engaged with toys by evaluating both their visual, narrative and tactile qualities. As I have played with toys in the sense of manipulating and e.g. photographing them it becomes possible to see this thesis as representing a multidimensional and multimodal research approach.

Research space

Research on adult experiences of *toys* is unavoidably also research on *play*. Play scholar Burghardt has stated that... ‘serious scholars typically ignore the subject [adult play], while those who do not are *themselves* ignored’ (Burghardt, 2006, emphasis orig.). Nevertheless, academics have started to ponder upon the ways in which adults could benefit from playing. Psychologists van Leeuwen and Westwood believe that ‘understanding the individual reasons for ludic engagement in general and for adults in particular would advance the understanding of play as a means to actively improve one’s own well-being and experienced quality of life’ (van Leeuwen & Westwood, 2008, 160). The possible resistance in valuing the importance of play may have to do with its elusive nature. Play, says play scholar Stuart Brown, is by its very nature a slightly anarchic. ‘It is about stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. It is about bending rules of thought, action and behavior’ (Brown, 2009, 193). I have indeed, bent the first rule of tradition by turning to adult players when researching toy play. For toys are, as stated previously, artefacts that are at least in western societies most traditionally thought of as playthings belonging to childhood. The first idea connecting to the research space of the study has to do with stretching the concept of play beyond the firsthand associations of childhood.



The second idea in cementing the research space concerns with the international scope. In practice, this means that this study considers toy play as a universal phenomenon. As I employ a novel research topic and one that spreads not only across different geographical areas but also areas of culture, the collecting of materials has happened geographically on an axis stretching from the U.S.A. to Japan with Europe in the middle. Furthermore, toys as a visual and also a tactile, material medium require an understanding of both dimensions. Additionally, as visual culture today means not only what can be perceived in the physical environment, I have had to expand my vision to the toy play activities that take place in online, virtual and social communities. The third idea describing the research space then, underlines the manifold dimensions of culture that manifest both in playgrounds of the material and digital worlds.

Questions defining the research space:

- * What? TOYS
- * Used how? (ARTEFACTS IN) PLAY
- * Used by who? ADULT PLAYERS (OF THE western WORLD)
- * Used where? ONLINE AND OFFLINE PLAYGROUNDS

Multidisciplinary and multimethodological approach

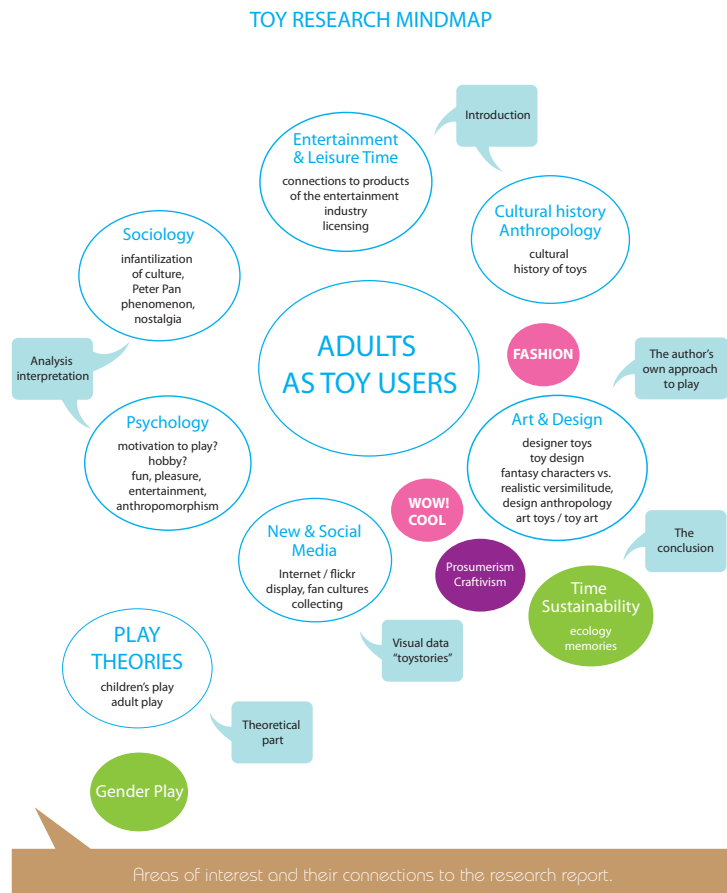
‘A certain spirit belongs to the basic structures of play – they are characterized by easiness, freedom and satisfaction which comes with succeeding – and they fulfil the player with this spirit’ (Gadamer, 2004, 86). To conduct a study that employs previous research on play is not necessarily easy, but I have to admit that the area of research has filled me with the kind of spirit that Hans-Georg Gadamer writes about in the quote above. The challenges in studying play, are still abundant. In the words of Soini – and as many play and toy researchers probably would agree – the field of study does, despite its charming nature, turn out to be a hard area to research (Soini, 1991, 13). This means that each study must have a research plan purely of its own – an individually created list of actions that need to be conducted in order to clarify the phenomenon. A study of a novel research topic – in adult toy play, in particular then – needs a thorough analysis of the playthings, play environments and play activities partaken by the players themselves. In my understanding, the result would be insufficient if only one of these areas was examined.

During different periods of time, play may manifest in a variety of ways. This is why humans implement play in different ways during different times (Karkama, 1981, 15). As Unt notes, ‘various disciplines that study play have different foci, backgrounds and applications. Therefore, it is complicated even to outline a history of play studies’ (2012, 103). As Henricks points out, in many cases play studies constitute not an academic discipline but rather an *interdiscipline* or *multidiscipline* (2008, 171). Cross-cultural studies of play, claims Smith, are of great potential interest (Smith, 2010). This thesis represents a case of both multidisciplinary and cross-cultural research. Furthermore, it brings forward questions that have not been highlighted either in studies of play or toys. Moreover, the multimethodological approach has allowed me to further use different paths of reasoning when exploring theories of play and analysing the research data.¹⁷

The relevance of my study becomes clear when going through the previous writings on play and particularly toy play: Adult toy play is by no means a new phenomenon in time. Yet it seems that the only appropriate ways of addressing this topic is by discussing the activity of play through various arts (theatre, music, fine arts), gaming or sports. In this light, it is extremely important to understand that due to the somewhat ‘hidden’ nature of adult toy play, it must be carefully studied from different perspectives and by

¹⁷ In other words, I have moved from theory to hypothesis to observation and confirmation to distill relevant information from previous theories on play, in order to observe how adult toy play could be seen in the light of these theories. Further, I have moved from observation to hypothesis and on to theorizing, when analyzing my data in order to construct theoretical propositions for adult toy play.

doing so, tempted out of its hiding place behind discursive attempts to mask toy play something only vaguely understandable, such as a ‘toy hobby.’ This thesis is an attempt to deconstruct the meanings underlying this rhetoric.



Research of the present is typically contextualizing and combining (Taira, 2008, 238). This study approaches the phenomena of adult toy play from several directions, as contemporary toys belong to several areas of culture and can thus be explored through different realms of the academia and research traditions (See graph on the left). Also, the realm of design studies acknowledges the need to pay attention to several disciplines. According to Hekkert and Schifferstein, research on product experience is situated at the intersection of several scientific (sub)disciplines (2007, 5). This research is primarily conducted with the (toy) designer audience in mind. The design of the research itself is however, laid out in a way that makes it understandable for a broader audience as well. A researcher of play may find it interesting to explore how I address contemporary forms of object play in the light of the empirical data. Again, readers interested in visual, material and digital cultures may find it useful to see how I have made connections between these academic disciplines. The collecting methods for the gathering of research materials used in the study (conducted during 2008–2011) are described in the following.

(Triangulation of) Data

According to King Roth (1998, 17) the qualitative research methods that design research may employ include for example observation/notation, participatory research, personal interviews, diaries and self-reporting. Again, according to Smith, play has been studied by observation in natural environment, observation in structured environment, interviews and questionnaires and by examining other sources such as toy inventories, pictures and photographic records, and other evidence relevant to children's play (Smith, 2010, 12). Triangulation provides possibilities to observe the research object through many lenses at the same time. Suominen notes that triangulation in itself is not an actual method, but rather something describing the attitude of a researcher, a kind of meta-method.¹⁸ How I have applied the idea of triangulation in this study connects with both gathering and analyzing the data. (See graph on page 61).

My aim has been first to look at how toys are approached in theoretical, industrial and popular writings, and second to conduct qualitative interviews with toy designers, toy players and toy researchers in order to gain a thorough understanding of the research topic. Additionally, I have used multiple methods of selecting and gathering materials such as documenting toy stories, keeping a visual journal and devoting myself to toy play in person – *autoplay*.

¹⁸ See Suominen, Jaakko (2010) "Triangulaatio digitaalisen kulttuurin lähestymistapana" [Triangulation as an approach in digital culture] at <http://jaasuo.wordpress.com/2010/06/01/triangulaatio-digitaalisen-kulttuurin-lahestymistapana/>.

Based on both qualitative interview data as primary research material and multiple visual and narrative 'toy stories' as secondary material, the study at hand thus explores adult experiences relating to engagement with toys from a variety of different viewpoints. The chosen methods will be explained in more detail in the following passages.


Theoretical, industrial and popular reviews

The first level of research is focused on finding, collecting and a close reading of both texts and visual materials. First, I have made a comprehensive literary review of books in the genres of the cultural history of toys and theories of play. Second, I have familiarized myself with research articles in the realm of design research, game studies and when possible, contemporary toys. As a practicing toy industry professional myself, I have found it useful to employ materials that I have collected at industry events, such as the international toy fairs in London, Nuremberg and New York, including brochures, PR and press material and popular books. Throughout the research process I have paid particular attention to relevant articles in toy industry magazines, attended seminars and gathered various print material from toy fairs keeping an eye especially on product launches in the realm of designer toys not only targeted to adults, but that are clearly aimed at a wider player audience that expands the traditional notion of children as the only consumer group for contemporary toys.

Some toy education materials have also been utilized in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how toy design is approached in education. The diverse materials are linked by both visual and narrative approaches to the toy of today. As ascertained in the introductory chapter, the role of media is central in the formulation and playing with contemporary toys. I have not limited myself to the medium of academic journals, but included newspaper and magazine articles as they have provided interesting, and sometimes novel, viewpoints to the dimensions of toy play at adult age.

The emergence and the expansion of various kinds of digital playgrounds on the Internet add another layer that plays an important role in understanding how material toys and digital play culture converge. During the process of familiarizing myself with these texts and images, I found many articles on player behaviour in the areas of material culture and digital gaming useful in widening the understanding of contemporary playfulness. Generally, I want to address the phenomenon of adult toy play by developing a dialogue between these different areas of culture by considering both their physical and virtual dimensions.

TRIANGULATION MATRIX ¹: Research materials, methods and their role in the research

SOURCE	ROLE OF THE TOY	RESEARCH MATERIAL(S)	METHOD/ AREA	THESIS
Toy industry	Product	Brochures and press material, industry magazines, popular books, toy education materials	Review (theoretical, industrial, popular)	Background I (Introduction; explaining the current design and market of toys)
Visual culture	Subject, theme	Toys seen in popular contemporary contexts: magazines, articles, TV, films, documents, urban environments, art	Analysis of visual materials	Background II (Introduction; explaining the ludic turn through contemporary visual experience)
Sociology	'Infantile obsession'	Literature: academic & popular writings	Discourse analysis	Background III (Introduction; explaining ASYL ²)
Play theory, toy research, game studies, design research, material culture studies	Research object: 'plaything'	Literature: monographs, articles, readers, conference papers, notes	Inquiry into Play theory, game & fan & media studies, design research	Theory (WOW; formulating theoretical viewpoints on toy design)
Interviews	Artefact designed and played with; resource	Toy designers, Artists toying, Adult toy players (fans, hobbyists)	Qualitative research, discourse analysis	Practice I (WOW, FLOW; conceptualizing toy play)
Flickr, TIB, YouTube (social media + fansites)	Artefact played and displayed	Toy photographs (e.g. Blythe, Uglydolls, Star Wars)	Content and discourse analysis	Practice II (GLOW; profiling adult toy player activities)
Own production 'Toying with art'	Inspirational tool for photoplay, Co-agent	Toy photographs (e.g. Blythe, Uglydolls, Pullip)	Autoplay	Practice III (GLOW; analyzing visual data of adult toy play activities)
Thesis 	Source for designerly knowledge	Research report	Theoretical and pragmatic applications	Conclusions (AFTERGLOW; Principles of adult play in contemporary toy cultures)

¹ In the social sciences, triangulation is often used to indicate that more than two methods are used in a study with a view to double (or triple) checking results. This is also called "cross examination". Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulation_\(social_science\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulation_(social_science)) Also: "Mixing methodologies; e.g. data with interviews is a profound form of triangulation." See: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/staff/Triangulation.pdf>. The Triangulation Matrix is a concept developed by Jaakko Suominen, see: <http://jaasuo.wordpress.com/2010/08/30/trianguaatiomatriisi/>

² ASYL, abbreviation for Adults Staying Younger Longer. A counter trend to KGOY (Kids Growing Older Younger), also discussed under the concepts of 'infantilization', 'Forever Kids' and 'the Peter Pan phenomenon'.

Toy stories

The second level of the research concentrated on the collecting of adult toy stories. Organizing an 'Adult Toy Day' in Pori, Finland in spring 2009 allowed me to come into contact with the 'everyday' toy players. At this one day event in a public space everyday people could pay a visit, show their toy and share the story of the plaything. I refer to the interviews conducted during this event with the abbreviation 'ATD'. The interviews were based on the idea that the participants 'show-and-tell' the story/ies of their toy(s) in a free manner.¹⁹



A historical doll shown to the author during the 'Adult Toy Day', organized in Pori, Finland, May 2009.

Interviews

During years 2008–2009 I conducted thematic interviews with toy designers and toy design educators (TD) in the U.S.A., Hong Kong, Germany and Holland, contemporary Finnish artists using toys in their art works and finally, everyday toy players.²⁰

The topics of the questions in interviews with designers concentrated on the work of the toy designer and their experience in relation to toys. In order to formulate questions relevant for design practitioners, I consulted the study of Nuutinen (2004) who has studied tacit knowledge in predicting trends relating to fashion among design professionals.

¹⁹ The method of collecting 'toy stories' is not an invention of my own. For example, the V&A Museum of Childhood has encouraged people who have worked in the British toy industry to share their personal stories and photographs in order to help to preserve the history of British toy-making as a part of V&A Museum of Childhood British Toy Making Project. Source: www.museumofchildhood.org.uk (also a hand-out received at the London Toy Fair 2011).

²⁰ The 'everyday' toy players refer to adults who interact with toys outside of their professional activities.

The research instrument used in this study provided a suitable reference point for my own research, as I found the thematic list for the interview questions useful in my own study as well. The study conducted by Nuutinen shows that contemporary fashion designers are not only observers of the Zeitgeist, but also the source point for establishing trends. Toy designers of today can similarly be seen not only as followers of trends, but moreover as creators of new trends that come to have an affect on culture even outside of the industry dedicated to playthings. As similar studies have not been carried out with toy designers before, the choice to turn to other areas of design research in order to see how interviews of this kind have been constructed, seemed like a fruitful idea.²¹

The interviews with artists 'toying' (TA) and 'everyday' players (TP) focused on the 'toy experiences' of different toy players between the ages between 20 and 65+ years. All participants were Finnish.²²

The interviews with toy researchers (TR) and toy industry expert Dr. Toy (DfT), were carried out as thematic interviews during 2009–2011 in Finland and the U.S.A with scholars from both countries. These interviews concentrated mainly on the following questions:

- * How do you define a toy?
- * How do you define play?
- * What kind of toy creates an experience?
- * When you buy a toy, what attracts you to it?
- * What do you emphasise as important, when thinking about toy design?
- * Do toys influence creativity?

²¹ Nuutinen, Ana (2004) *Edelläkävijät. Hiljainen, implisiittinen ja eksplisiittinen tieto muodin ennustamisessa* [The Pioneers. Tacit, implicit and explicit knowledge in forecasting fashion] Taideteollisen korkeakoulun julkaisusarja A 53. Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, Saarijärvi.

²² For interview questions for the aforementioned, see Appendices I and II.



The Uglydoll soft toy companion of the author named Kaveri (in Eng. 'Pal') photographed during a hike in San Francisco, 2009.

Visual journal

In presenting my findings of the phenomenon of adult toy play, I put significant emphasis on the visual characteristics of this phenomenon. Visual experience is central to everyday life. One important part of arguing for the existence and qualities of adult relationships with toys is, furthermore, to present visual data related to toys and their culture. What does a 'visual culture' approach look like in the scope of this thesis? To get a wider understanding of the interaction adults carry out with toys and to avoid the situation of only having to deal with toy stories on a textual level, I wanted to reinforce the collecting of material further. This was done by resorting to the realm of the visual, namely to one of toy (and play) related images.

My method of employing a visual journal throughout the research process means in practice that I have actively been photographing both toys *and* play. The former everywhere from shop windows to street markets in the Arab Emirates to toys that have simply been left lying around in gardens such as on the Fogo island of Cape Verde or Nusa Lembongan in Bali. The latter – play – in environments where I have seen it to happen publically, such as the playing of the classic board game Backgammon in Turkey, a shot from a busy Pachinko parlour in Tokyo, monkeys playing on Elephant Island near Mumbai, a cat clearly engaged in object play in Istanbul, Turkey. Products of my visual journal can be viewed as photographic documentation of toys and play throughout the pages of the thesis and as such, they present themselves as a supporting means parallel to the argument developed in the text.

This method takes a leisurely stand to documenting as the products are more of the snapshot-kind, but at the same time helps to interpret the culture(s) (and "everywhereness") of toys and the phenomenon of play in a way that would perhaps never have been possible to capture in words.

Images can make us pay attention to things in new ways. Some images are more memorable than academic texts, and therefore more likely to influence the ways we think and act. ...Images can be used to communicate more holistically, incorporating multiple layers, and evoking stories or questions (Weber, 2008, 4–5).

Further, I have utilized both imagery and texts of toys as seen in popular contemporary contexts, both in material and digital environments: magazines, articles, comics, TV, films, documents, urban environments, art, columns, blog writings, fan sites and online photo management applications. The third level of research focused on material collection from Internet based photo management application Flickr, where I concentrated on analyzing toy themed photography.

An image can be 'the thing itself' – an object of inquiry, a multilayered theoretical statement, writes Sandra Weber (2008, 2). This image-based research method, which in my case has mostly meant photographing toys in different environments, has not only improved my understanding of toys as manipulable artefacts of play, but as objects that afford creative manipulation and artistic photographing – *photoplay* as a form of autoplay; a method that will be discussed more specifically in the following. As documentation of both toys and play, these photographs 'speak for themselves' as a parallel level of argumentation. In this way, I suggest that they emphasize the objectivity of the study.

Autoplay

Dorst argues that one can only really learn to master things that relate to one's own experience. Design experiences lived and experienced by oneself cannot be borrowed from others (2006, 221). Jones claims that the people who create entertainment are usually former fans themselves (2002, 226). Many researchers act out of a position that acknowledge their own attitude towards their object of research: Scholar-fans are scholars who are also self-identified fans of what they study (Hills, 2007, and 2002, 11–15).

Although this work borrows observations and ideas from previous theories and studies, the personal experiences and fandom of the researcher are of crucial value in generating new knowledge. In a hermeneutic approach, reminds Unt, every researcher's personal history as a player affects the understanding of the concept of play (2012, 102). To make sense of the toy stories, play memories and attitudes of other toy players, it soon became clear to me that I would need to examine my own position towards playthings. Autoethnography – the study of self – thus seemed a logical direction to take. As McIlveen notes, 'autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner' (McIlveen, 2008, 3). It entails 'some form of autobiographical storytelling; it serves to explicate a specific dimension of personal experience' (ibid., 7).

As the study deals with toys and the playful activities in relation to these artefacts, I wanted to employ play as a method that follows the idea of autoethnography, but is curious, exploratory and free of pre-set rules in its nature. Thus, the fourth and final method that I have used in collecting research material for this dissertation follows artistic research, which in this case will be referred to as *autoplay*. On a more concrete level, I have explored play both by writing about my personal play experiences (as I remember them from childhood) with the toys of yesterday and more importantly – by starting to play with new toys as an adult.

What children take from their experience with toys is, according to Judy Ellis, 'not the memory of the toy itself, but the reminiscence of individual play experiences, the stories, called up through their interaction with toys – part of a personal mythology that began before they could read or write' (Ellis, 2005, 50). Throughout the process of carrying out the study and writing this very book, I have constantly revisited my own childhood memories of both non-material and object play. Utilizing this form of personal reflection must however, be evaluated through a critical filter in terms of reliability of scientific evidence. As the research process evolved, however, I understood that there may be differences in my toy experiences of the (childhood) past and those of the (researching adult) present. A researcher that utilizes narratives as a source of data should keep in

mind that 'stories are subjective and should be understood as dramatized and edited versions of experiences' (Battarbee, 2003, 107). As Battarbee notes further, 'verbal stories of experiences focus more on the meanings of the experience than the sensations and feelings themselves' (2004, 63). As Chudacoff writes, memories and autobiographies are in fact acts of inventing a life, a form of storytelling that is mediated by the ways in which the writers wish to interpret their lives to others (2007, xiii).

Despite the probable 'storyness' of my personal play memories, I have decided to reflect upon them wherever appropriate in the context of the thesis. By doing this I want to acknowledge the possibility of the 'inner toy player' in myself and the traces of excitement that still come to my mind in a very vivid manner, when I immerse myself in the memories of the intense feelings that were connected to acquiring and playing with toys. This study undoubtedly deals with things that make me go "wow" – then and now. To separate my childhood toy experiences from the adult ones, the former occur on the pages of the thesis as written journal entries and the latter as toy (documentations) and toy art themed (artistic) photography.

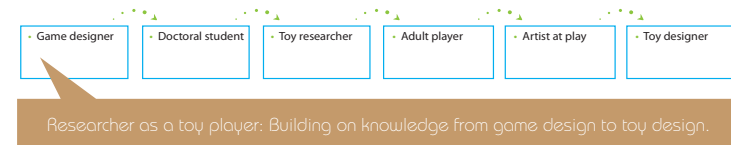
As Mika Elo writes: 'Art contributing to research consists of art practice that at some point becomes research' (2007, 15). Toying with art and playing an artist add another layer of playfulness to the autoethnographic take on research that this study utilizes. Effectively, this means that I have used my own toy themed creations (participatory installations and photographs that employ dolls, soft toys and action figures) as vehicles of research.

By taking this path I have, at the same time, allowed myself to indulge in the activity of toy play. In other words, to learn more about the motivations that adult players have to interact with toys, I needed to seriously question my own reasons to collect, display, travel and actively interact with different toys and most importantly, allow myself some time and space for exploring these playthings. Through doing toy photography, an activity that I have decided to refer to as 'photoplay', by building art works/interactive installations and by showcasing these at several art exhibitions has not only made me 'toy with art' and 'play an artist', but more importantly, contributed to my understanding of the reasons for adult toy play on a more general level. As a by-product of starting the endeavour of a *photoplaying* and exhibiting visual artist I have developed a deeper understanding of the motivations behind using playthings as a communicative medium in creation of art. These works of art have served both as introspective evidence of the "playful me" and on the other hand, provided understanding of adult playfulness on a more general level. The results of photoplay as a part of my autoplay can be seen as another visual layer of the thesis and thus illustrating the playful explorations of myself as a 'toying artist.'



The author digging through the Brian Sutton-Smith Archives at the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, 2011.

The analysing method of the various data mostly follows the ideas presented in discourse analysis and visual analysis. In other words, I have examined my research materials with great care in order to detect thematic similarities and disconnections in both the visual and textual 'toy stories' of toy designers, artists' toying and 'everyday players'. Finally, based on the most central observations I have made about adult views on the experiences related to toy play, I have been able to envision the nature of toy design work, contemporary toys, the playgrounds and the player profiles as presented further on in this thesis. Further, as the topic of the thesis suggests, I have been able to detect principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures and by doing so, been able to draw conclusions about the complex relationships between toy designers, artists and everyday players with the toys of today.



The concept of toy

We have to define first what a toy is. Is a stone outside a toy? Is a craft set a toy? So is a Playstation. Is it the person using it getting enjoyment out of it time and time again? It could be a Korean lady with a new mobile, a guy with a car or a girl with a baby doll that cries. (TD/ss)

As the toy experiences that designers aim for depend largely on what their intended audience is, the designer needs an understanding of whom s/he is designing for. Accordingly, a toy researcher must detect the type of toys s/he is examining in order to hold the research materials in leash. The following passage lays out the outline of the study at hand by creating a framework what is considered a toy in the scope of the thesis. Familiarizing oneself with actual toys brings the researcher closer to the concrete. Toys as objects of the material world is a vast category of artefacts, both hand-made and industrially produced. On a general level and quite simply put, toys are the material artefacts of play (Mergen, 1983, 103).

Today, a toy is also an object with a definite design that can reflect contemporary fashions and trends (Brougère, 1999). Before making an outline of the toys that this study is concerned with, I will shortly present some examples of how widely the concept of toy may be interpreted:

There are local, in many cases handmade toys and global, mass-marketed and plastic toys. Additionally, in many countries an overflowing phenomenon of street market toys (that follow no rules in terms of choice of material, safety standards or in some cases even in terms of play value) is present. These 'kitschy' toys may be dancing dolls or fully automated, pre-programmed vehicles that go around and around forever. The mechanized toy is clearly an engineered spectacle that falls outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, street market toys represent an area of toy culture not just belonging to the post-modern interpretations of automata, but of contemporary visuality as well.

As a child, one means of expressing my creativity in combination with play was drawing paper dolls and paper doll clothes, then cutting these out of paper and organizing the dolls in different spatial arrangements. Actually, the characters were not humans, but depicted creatures with animal heads and human bodies. I remember drawing tens if not hundreds of whole animal families paper dolls; bunnies, cats, dogs. Generally, drawing cute animals was much more intriguing than trying to capture human faces in the design of my creations. Creating these characters was something that I indeed see as a form of play. On the other hand, craft sets in my thinking have always belonged to the category of art supplies more than toys, although both may – without a doubt – be played with.

The concept of 'toy' is very broad. As Greenhalgh notes, academics have struggled for a generation to determine whether in fact we need to classify things before we can understand and use them (1997, 47). On the other hand, as Kudrowitz and Wallace note, 'classification is the first step in bringing order into any scientific endeavour' (2008, 1).²³ So what may be considered toys, but that are left outside of the focus of this study are listed in the following. This is done to demonstrate that the concept of a toy is largely dependent on the discourse and context. As I am concentrating on dolls, soft toys and action figures, toys that are acknowledged, but will not be addressed, are miniatures of all sorts²⁴ and erotic toys (perhaps a category of utensils that is mostly referred to as 'adult toys').

²³ Orig. Michael Ashby and Kara Johnson (2002) *Materials and Design: The Art and Science of Material Selection in Product Design*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Woburn, MA.

²⁴ With miniatures I point to 'anonymous' figurines that may be connected with grander thematic worlds such as the animal world or war-inspired figurines. I have noticed, however, that in the case of the doll house doll, the figurine may indeed come to carry qualities similar to a character toy. Therefore, I have not excluded dolls that are played with as having a personality to them. In this case it means a personality developed by the player him/herself.

I have noted, however, that categorizing toys is not self-evident, as the boundaries become blurred, for instance when it comes to erotic toys. I have, for example seen a Hello Kitty themed erotic toy.

Cars, boats, motor cycles, sporting equipment, technical appliances, various gimmicks and gadgets are often regarded as (boys) toys. That boys to men consider their horse powered vehicles or toolkits as toys has been known forever, but at the same time so can fashion or the means for interior decoration be seen as toys or toying with garments and objects more commonly in the world of women. Likewise, kitchenware have also utilized playful elements either in their design (Alessi) and marketing (Bodum) although they have (other) utilitarian functions apart from being things to 'play' with in a broader understanding of the word. The Juicy Salif citrus squeezer from Alessi, designed by Philippe Starck is a classic example of 'impossibility' in terms of aesthetics and functionality in design literature, but there are other examples that fit the discussion on toys better. The 'Mandarin' (Alessi model ASG31) squeezer by Stefano Giovannoni is a creation that communicates playfulness perfectly in its manipulable nature.

The concept of toy has functioned as a metaphor in commercial culture not only in the category of utensils but also products connected to lifestyle, cosmetics and fashion. Soft toys or 'plush' are constantly being used in advertising to communicate what is generally considered 'soft' or 'cute'. Although often the so-called 'family brands' are marketed in a playful manner, the advertisements are clearly targeted at adults, who in most cases make the purchasing decisions for this type of products.

Cosmetics counters selling lipstick have been dubbed 'toy shops for women' (Gloria magazine, autumn 2010). The Pelican Hotel, a 'boutique' or 'design' hotel in Miami's South Beach markets itself as "A toy-hotel decorated with taste and no compromise, playing with different styles, recycled furniture, and objects in an exquisite design with contemporary flair."

American cosmetics brand Benefit has used the 'action doll' as a visual element in their campaign. Further, to give more examples of the recent emergence of toyishness in consumer goods outside of actual toys, Scandinavian clothing brand Jack & Jones launched a campaign in 2010 "Become a Girl Toy!" where young men were depicted as fashion dolls wrapped in packaging (and tagged 'Urban Sports Hunk Wearing a Soft Shell Jacket' and 'Casual Cool Big City Guy Wearing a Peacoat') more familiar to the world of Barbie (or Ken!). The ironic marketing message played with the idea of young women as active counterparts 'toy with' men, who in the campaign took the role of male dolls. During 2011, some 'real' toys made their way into Jack & Jones's shops: When visiting a concession of the clothes chain in Mumbai, India, I noticed that soft toy bull dogs made out of denim were on sale and that modernized tin soldiers were used as shop decoration.



Meet all the Uglys at the Ugly Shop, FAO Schwarz/New York, 2012.

Again, one of the most extreme forms of connecting the concept of a toy with living beings is the term that has been used in connection with canines. In the beginning of the 21st century *toy dogs* experienced a renaissance in popularity, when media celebrities started being photographed with their Chihuahuas.

Contemporary toy characters: Dolls, action figures and soft toys

What kind of objects are toys, when they are considered as *traditional* playthings – meaning artefacts purely created for playing purposes and not just objects that in one way or another express playfulness? Let us take some examples of taxonomies of toys from the literature reviewed for this study:

Action figures, banks, battery-operated toys, cast iron toys, celluloid toys, character toys, farm toys, guns, marbles, metal toys, model kits, paper toys, pedal cars, plastic toys, premiums (promotional items such as in cereal boxes), robots, toy soldiers, tin toys, vehicles, wind-up toys, wooden toys.
(Rinker, 1991, 104–122)

Stuffed toys, Housekeeping Toys, Infant Toys, Sports Equipment, Trading Cards and Accessories, Racing Sets and Accessories, School Supplies, Scientific and Nature Toys, Inflatable Toys, Kites, Ride-on Vehicles, Novelties, Outdoor Play Equipment, Party Goods, Cosmetics Jewelry, Pool Toys, Pre-School Toys, Premium, Puzzles, Radio Control Toys, Miniatures, Model Kits, Musical Toys, Seasonal Products, Wooden Toys, Action Figures, Electronic Accessories, Computer Software, Arts & Crafts Kits & Supplies, Dolls & Accessories, Doll Houses & Furniture, Battery Operated Toys, Bicycles, Book publisher, Cars, Trucks & Accessories, Music Players, Clocks & Watches, Animals & Figures, Construction Toys, Costumes & Accessories, Educational Toys, Juvenile Furniture, Action, Sports & Skill Games, Board Games, Guns...the list goes on.
(Think, make, play, 2007)

Babies' Toys, Sport and Exercise, Dolls and Furry Toys, Construction and Crafts, Role Playing and Masquerade, Party and Board Games, Modeled on Reality, Electronic and Mechanical Toys. (van Uffelen, 2010, 2–3)

The curators of the exhibition *Of Toys and Men* as seen in Helsinki Art Museum in spring 2012, have divided the toys into following categories: animal toys, mechanical toys, TV-inspired toys and girls' and boys' toys (Raivio, 2012, 10). As the quotes above demonstrate, the list for toy categories seems almost endless. Furthermore, as toys as an area of material culture develops in parallel with e.g. technological innovations and new materials, novel categories will constantly emerge.

Different toys afford different possibilities for communicating with the environment. The thesis at hand acknowledges the plentiful meanings and dimensions that ‘toys’ as a category of human-made artefacts may have, but restricts itself to a particular area of playthings. By concentrating on toys with a face and in some cases other forms of human likeness which I have here decided to use the common term *character toys*²⁵ (this term will not, however, limit the toys to license-character based toys) for, several interesting categories will be excluded.

This sub category of toys allows me to limit the research to toys that have facial features and accordingly, some resemblance to either the human or animal form by having either a set of eyes, a nose and/or a mouth. The outline further enables the study to concentrate on three categories of contemporary toys, namely dolls, action figures and soft toys (or *plush*, as the toy industry also calls them, see Ladensohn Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990, 26).²⁶

Teddy bears, other soft animals, dolls and Lego were the most popular toys in Finland in the 1980s (Riihonen, 1991, 115). I lived my childhood during this time, so the choice of toy categories for the outline in this study seems to be parallel with what was generally popular in my native Finland.

Play people, action figures and/or animals made from cloth, plastic, or wood are used for imaginary play and stimulate youngsters to create elaborate stories and role-play with the figures (Fuerbach, 2004, 80).

By looking at these three different categories, which again have a common denominator (the face), it is possible to arrive at a richer understanding of their meanings to their owners. I presume that e.g. soft toys may function as secure objects for their owners, and that dolls may have other types of reasons to be employed in play, e.g. they may be used in various forms of role-play and identity work. Furthermore, by concentrating on the three categories mentioned above, it is easier to analyze possible changes and preferences in play patterns in connection with these particular categories.

Even though I will restrict myself to the aforementioned character toy category, it is important to understand where this toy type has its roots.

²⁵ According to Goldstein ‘many dolls and action figures can be construed either as characters from a fictional world or as physical objects in the real world’ (Goldstein, 2012, 11).

²⁶ The decision to focus on how adults interact with character toys also bridges the study further with the realm of game design, where two eyes and a mouth are considered ‘a gateway to the soul’, at least if Finnish game designers are to be believed. See i.e. Pöppönen, Hannu (2012) “Ensin tarvitaan hahmo”, [First you need a character], *Helsingin Sanomat*, 9.10.2012, C1.

By making a short overview of what the cultural history of toys has to say about the miniature, we will arrive at an understanding of how the contemporary character has developed from a simulation of the ‘real’ into a character of fantasy and in the case of toys targeted specifically to adults, even to the ‘hyper-real’.

At the same time it is important to understand the role of miniatures in the cultural history of toys: The history of the toy begins with the miniature – an object that is, in its beginnings, based on reality – people, animals, vehicles and various tools. “Everything that can be done on a large scale can be done on a small scale” (Ojanen, 2012, 7).²⁷ Miniatures were, as late as in the 1700s, produced more for the cabinets of curiosities of the princes than children (Lönqvist, 1981, 63).

Animal toys with wheels have existed since antiquity (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). These toys aimed at realism, although looking at these artefacts now, makes them seem crude and allusive in their design.

One of the early concerns about toys’ effects on imaginative play had to do with the aesthetics of the toy. Although I will come back to this matter later in the thesis, it is perhaps appropriate to demonstrate to the reader, what kind of attitudes playthings were met with in the 1800s:

... the ability to exactly reproduce deprived the child of the ability to play and think creatively. Educational reformer August Grube complained, “our [toy] industry has damaged the ability of our children to properly play insofar as they have created hundreds of new and exact miniatures that do not leave room for a child’s fantasy but rather mirror objects of everyday material life. (Grube, 1855 cited in Ganaway, 2008, 377) A. W. Grube, *Von der sittlichen Bildung der Jugend im 1. Jahrzent des Lebens* (Leipzig, 1855, 241).

In 1902 the German toy designer Richard Steiff (1877–1939) got the idea for a toy bear with moveable limbs just like those of a doll. Until then, toy bears had been depicted standing on all fours (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). Teddy’s bear was named after president Teddy Roosevelt after a famous hunting incident as reported by the U.S. press. Leclerc writes: ‘U.S. toy manufacturer Ideal had as early as 1903 negotiated with then American President Theodore Roosevelt the rights to manufacture a plush toy named ‘Teddy Bear’ after a 1902 Washington Post cartoon reported him ordering the mercy killing of a wounded young bear at a hunting party, became a toy icon that changed the category of soft toys in legendary ways’. The Teddy Bear was the

²⁷ In a doll house, the scale is usually 1:12 (Ojanen, 2012, 7).

first mass-marketed character toy (Leclerc, 2008). Soft toys became popular at the end of the nineteenth century and a big trade was generated in Germany (Hillier, 1965, 126). Steiff is still the most famous teddy bear brand in the world today (Avomaa, 2012, 32). Some animal toys started to lose their animalism and to gain human characteristics. This development led to a significant change in their capacity to 'look back' as the next quote illustrates:

Soft toy animals; in so far as they are humanized, in the sense of being endowed by a child and parents with human qualities, including the ability to 'look back', to communicate and to receive communications, they share the function of companion and friend, protector and protected (Newson, 1979, 90).

Another realm of toy design that also praised realism as an original ambition, was the one concerned with dolls. Early dolls most often depicted adults, not babies or young children, not to mention 'twens' as is the case in current fashion doll design. In the 1960s, Mary Hillier wrote in her *Pageant of Toys*: "No one has yet made a study of the physiognomy of dolls, but it would be an intriguing subject. [...] Among these little effigies of childhood, the dolls, the same holds good: it is the face that matters, giving character and nationality" (Hillier, 1965, 110). The importance of the face was thus recognized.

On the other hand, a doll designer Käthe Kruse, maintained that the way to a child's heart was not through its eyes in the form of a perfectly miniaturized doll, but through its hands in the shape of a soft toy.²⁸

The terms 'action figure' and 'movable fighting man' were coined in the 1960s by toy entrepreneur Don Levine and Hasbro as a way to describe their newly created G.I. Joe Doll and to avoid the potential "stigma" of little boys playing with dolls.²⁹

In the past, farm animals were popular toys. During urbanisation, the focus has shifted towards exotic animals and dinosaurs that do not have an immediate connection to the life of children (Römpötti, 2012). This applies to miniatures as well.

The history of miniatures has traditionally been perceived as a category of toys played with by men, but recent developments have witnessed that women are getting more

²⁸ See Reinelt (1956) cited in Ganaway (2008, 387) Kruse, „Wie das so kam“, 1956 quoted in Reinelt, *Käthe Kruse: Leben und Werk*, 42–43; Kruse, *Ich und meine Puppen*, 124).

²⁹ See Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 48; original quote from the press release for Levine's book *G.I. Joe: The Story Behind the Legend* at http://www.r1964.com/headquarters_quarterly/don_levine.html.

engaged with building replicas of the 'real', such as horses. The most popular form of modelling among Finnish hobbyists in 2010 was, however, painting figurines that often stem from fantasy (Saari, 2010). Here we can see that the understandings of 'miniature' stretch from the ready-made toy figurines to characters assembled by the players themselves. What is of importance is to see the shift of interest from the realistic into the fantastic. Nelson and Svensson note that during the past thirty years, toys are aligned more and more towards fiction than representation of reality (2005, 46). The development from replicas to fantasy characters is an interesting development in toy culture, which, according to my interpretation is connected to the spreading of media-related, narrative universes and characters that have their roots in the fantastic, not in nature.

KH: What do you think about toys that are given personalities, that are somehow character kind of toys?

DrT: Mickey Mouse started that and also ...television characters. It was inevitable that television came on the scene, the media, they made things popular so children want to have the doll or toy that looks like that character.

Kelts provides an interesting theory of why people become more interested in fantasy: In his thinking this happens 'when the reality around them is not as interesting or satisfying' (Kelts, 2007, 28). For instance, the success of Pokémon has had an affect on the goals of Japanese toy makers. Japanese toy makers have become voracious seekers of "characters", and anime represents the most colourful and accessible source of these. It also represents the most effective way of internationalizing toys and expanding the potential market for each new product (Kelts, 2007, 99).

All in all, character toys are strong bearers of connotations as they, bridge icon and object (Leclerc, 2008). Contemporary character toys are usually given names and personas, with their distinctive personalities described on their tags or in booklets included in their packaging³⁰. Some toys still come without names and back stories, as one of the interviewee's demonstrate:

Soft toys are the most favoured toys of children if Finnish educationalists are to be believed. One reason for this may be that their commerciality is faded into a minimum, as compared to fashion dolls or action figures. (TR/mrl)

³⁰ See image in subchapter Back stories: Narrative value".

The choice to limit the research to character toys, i.e. toys with a face, offers a unique possibility for paying attention to how adults approach, bond and play with artefacts that are consciously given a personality that is communicated through the facial features and expressions. This does not mean, however, that toys without a face would have a lesser meaning to players by not affording similar attachment or e.g. possibility to anthropomorphize the object.

Furthermore, I have decided not to include miniatures or scale models, such as toy soldiers as objects of research, as these kind of toys are often played with in combination with miniature worlds and come to have a meaning in groups of similar artefacts rather than as singular playthings with individual back stories and possible personalities. Moreover, these toys are almost exclusively replicas of the 'real', meaning that they have an equivalent in the real world that they try to mimic as closely as possible. At the same time, I am fully aware that as most toys are open-ended artefacts and by that, nothing really limits the player from attributing miniatures with similar qualities as character toys.³¹

Moreover, I have excluded dolls, action figures and soft toys that 'talk' or that have a sound chip implanted in them. As digital media scholar Sherry Turkle writes in her analysis on technologically enhanced toys of the past decennia: '...in the late 1990s... Tamagotchis and Furbies (both of which sold in the tens of millions) did not want to play tic-tac-toe, but would tell you if they were hungry or unhappy' (Turkle, 2011, 30). Coming from the direction of visual culture and design practice concentrating on the visceral and tactile experiences, it makes sense to leave out the dimension of sound, no matter how interesting this would be. Additionally, any technological features that enable technologically enhanced 'interactivity' with the toy (in other words what Sherry Turkle points to as 'sociable machines') are left out of my analysis. 'Virtual pets require caring in order to stay alive', as one of my interviewees points out (TR/mrI). Soft toys, again, 'have a more disinterested role. When needed, they function as refuge, keepers of memories and mental images' (ibid.).

³¹ However, I have included examples where doll house dolls have been given a strong – in some cases avatarial – personality by the player. Seen in this way, the 'anonymous' doll is brought to a new level in terms of narration: It is given a story that further on will enhance its personality. Further, the doll house doll first and foremost connects to its given environment, the doll house, and not to previously narrated story worlds in connection with the entertainment supersystem like in the case of most of the character toys today. Moreover, this applies to the category of adult dolls, such as *Real Dolls* (see Chapter 10). Also, as I see it, the player may create his or her toy character (doll or action figure) by playing with a construction toy, such as blocks or Lego. My interest is, however, mostly on the mass-produced characters, in which the idea of 'building' (or to promoting a whole 'system of play' as in the case of (standard bricks in the series) Lego) is not the first and foremost suggestion for, or affordance of play.

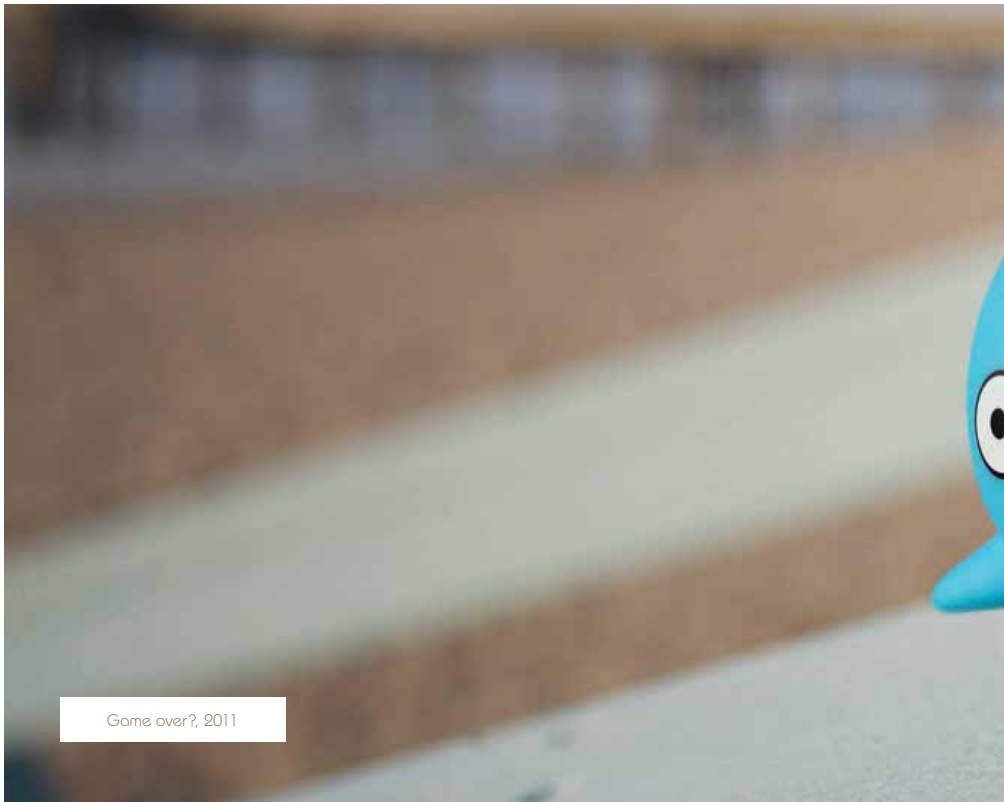
Nevertheless, I acknowledge the ongoing development of 'techno toys' as an important one especially when considering toy characters which contain some degree of technological hybridity across the analogue and virtual worlds. Furthermore, it should be noted that I have not come across examples of adults bonding with technologically enhanced dolls, soft toys or action figures in my research materials, with the exception of seal robots used in senior care in Japan and erotic 'toys' that utilize power sources.³² Erotic toys as a category of adult playthings is certainly an interesting research topic in itself, especially regarding the viewpoint of sensual, both visual and tactile aspects, not to mention the dimensions of 'play' itself in this context. However, acknowledging that even this category of 'toys' may have a face, they are not examined in this study.

Despite a clear connection to the 'real', one of the most specific characters of contemporary toys is, according to Nelson and Nilsson, that they depict something in the world around them (2002, 32). Therefore, trends in other areas of culture come to have an effect on toys in a fast-paced manner. An example follows: In contemporary times the prevailing food trend has become a major influence on the toy industry. One of the newest developments that mirrors the popularity of treats such as cupcakes are soft toys and figurines that loosely mimic these types of food. For example The YammyYammy company markets toys inspired by sushi, cupcakes, and dimsum. These 'food toys' are given faces, eyes and ultimately, personalities.

The inclusion of eyes is not, in fact, limited to dolls, soft toys or action figures. On the contrary, eyes are quite common in toys for young children, particularly in toys with the themes of time (clocks), communication (toy telephones) and transport (toy locomotives and cars) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 245). Moreover, eyes are a central feature in designer toys, one may say a relatively new subcategory of character toys. The remaining passage of this chapter will describe what is meant with designer toys in the context of this thesis.

Designer toy is a term used to describe toys and other collectibles that are produced in limited editions and created by artists and designers. Designer toys are made of a variety of materials of which plastic and vinyl are most common. The term also encompasses plush, cloth and latex dolls. Creators of designer toys usually have backgrounds in graphic design or illustration; some are classically trained in art and design, while others are self-taught.

³² For example, over time many elderly people have become attached to 'Paro', a technologically enhanced 'toy'. According to Turkle, seniors share stories and secrets with it: 'With the robot as partner, they recreate the times of their lives. To do these things, the adults must overcome their embarrassment at being seen playing with dolls. Many seniors handle this by saying something like, "People would think I'm crazy if they saw me talking to this." Once they have declared themselves not crazy, they can proceed in their relationship with a robot seal' (See Turkle, 2011, 109).



Game over?, 2011

Designer plush, a subcategory of designer toys, are soft, stuffed dolls created in limited quantities by artists and designers. Common designs include anthropomorphized animals of fantastic human likeness, although designer plush often feature entirely unique character designs. Designer plush dolls are usually given names and personas, with their distinctive personalities described on their tags or in booklets included in their packaging.

These toys, sometimes also referred to as *art toys*, settle on a grey area between on one hand the traditional, mass-marketed toys and on the other, works of art with toy-like features. According to van Uffelen, designer toys have gained popularity because ‘they offer select quality’ (2010, 6). What differentiates the designer toy from a proper work of art is its manipulable quality. Objects of art are usually not allowed to be toyed with, whereas a designer toy is movable (poseable, displayable) and thus allows playful engagement. Many designer toys include features that persuade the player to develop its narrative further on visual, tactile and narrative levels.



The category of designer toys seems to be far more sympathetic to bold ideas than the orderly western mass-market of toys. It is thus interesting to notice that many influences of the recent years have entered the field of (visual) toy design from the East. The global ‘toy giants’ have reacted to this development with some experimental toy lines although their ability to grasp trends from other areas of visual culture seems to be relatively slow. It is in the category of designer toys that the most fresh fashions are being utilized. Contemporary playthings, considered from the perspective of designer toys, embrace (besides the ‘cute’) current fashion’s fondness of the ‘dark’; odd, gothic and sometimes gruesome.

Before entering a more detailed discussion on the understanding and use of the contemporary toy, we shall take a closer look at where toys originated, how the industry and designers themselves consider the designing and marketing of the things for play, and most importantly, which elements may contribute to the experience considered crucial for novel toys entering the market: Namely, the *Wow*.



Hotjo's Cat, 2009

WOW

Consider the singular beauty of the word “wow”. ...

Imagine the particular enthusiasm it expresses – the sense of wonderment, astonishment, absolute engagement (Jenkins, 2007b, 1).

[wow] This means something that has not been done before and captures peoples' imagination. Something that is fun and clever. A different way of doing something that was done before. (TD/sp)

WOW is the unexpected, the surprising element or something that has not been done before. (TD/bk)

KH: I'm very interested in what constitutes the “wow” in a toy. Is that definable?
Dt: There are variations of wow. The first time it happens...jack-in-a-box, if it's right, if they laugh they want to do it again...The wow of experiencing play with a puppet for the first time, they can figure out that they can ...but wow is not a toy, it's what you can do with it. So those two aspects they give direction, so it's not necessarily anything material.

The most successful ideas have what many in the industry call a wow factor. This is some promotable feature that combined with a market need, delivers obvious excitement (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 144).

Some blockbuster toys reach such status because of the “X Factor” (del Vecchio, 2003, 33).

Chapter 3: Toys – the good, the valued and the wow

‘The best playthings are not necessarily [mass-produced] toys’ claims Maria-Kaisa Aula, Ombudsman for children’s matters in Finland (Kuluttajavirasto, 2009). A child (or an adult) may even create her own toys. I remember, very well, how a lot of my personal childhood play activities stemmed from the imagination, not from the use of artefacts meant for play especially. Quite the opposite, in fact: Some of the fondest memories that come to my mind when thinking about play in my childhood are the ones where scaffolding, fences and building constructions of sorts were imaginatively transformed into spaceships, the empty space underneath a writing desk into a tunnel or sand dunes and abandoned houses into mysterious archaeological sites and scenes for detective play. According to a Finnish study, school aged children use in their play a lot of small artefacts that are not necessarily toys (Karimäki; Kuluttajavirasto 2009). According to my own research data, many adults of today remember how they made some toys of their own as children. Most of the toy stories collected at adult toy day revealed playful interaction with organic materials in childhood. For example, ‘al’ played with self-made toys such as pine cone cows and horses (ATD/al). ‘kv’ told of toys that she made herself out of natural material such as pine cones (pigs) and yellow water lilies (sheep). She played outside with these war time self-made toys (ATD/kv).

My personal childhood play experiences, when not acquired through engagement with toys, seem to have developed, instead, from encounters with different environments that were, nevertheless, always of this material world and which in some way fed the imagination so that new worlds and plots could be imagined. But the human being also plays (and plays games with) with things (Luutonen, 2007, 162). Although I still remember – and value – immaterial, make-believe play, the thesis at hand is dedicated to the materially oriented and a particular form of play – playing with artefacts created for this purpose especially: Toys.

My favourite toys in childhood (as far as I can remember) were a Cabbage Patch Kids doll (a girl named Sofi), Fabuland Legos, My Little Ponies, a Strawberry Shortcake doll, a Kermit the frog soft toy and my father’s Batman car from the 1960’s.³³

³³ My Little Ponies are made from vinyl/rubber material, and all have silky manes and tails. They are made by Hasbro, and came in many different types and varieties between 1981 and 1991. They have designs on their rump and sometimes all over their sides. A true My Little Pony will always have a date and “Hasbro” stamped on one foot’ (see Birge, 2000, 7).



A fair booth sign at the Licensing Expo, Las Vegas 2012.

Most of the toy brands of my childhood (of which surprisingly many seem to connect to the supersystem of entertainment culture as described earlier) have made a comeback as re-launches in the past few years and thus, have a status of ‘retro toys’ which were originally designed in 1980s, or even earlier. However, times change and toy characters evolve (visually and physically) into something that does not necessarily seem ‘right’ when compared to the original designs which one became familiar with in childhood. Nevertheless, in the age of the ludic turn, the development of new toys is endless. As I will demonstrate further on, there are new designers and new designs, new raw materials, new kinds of toys – even new kinds of playgrounds and moreover, new toy players. In this chapter I approach the concept of toy by formulating a definition of the term. I also seek to articulate my own critical standpoint to earlier definitions given to toys as material objects. With these ends in mind, I develop a deeper understanding of the ontological aspects of the contemporary toy by concluding with a discussion of toys as tools that afford various forms of play value depending on who is playing; the designer as a toy industry representative or the end-user, the actual – and in this case *adult* – player.

Toy

7. a. A small article of little intrinsic value, but prized as an ornament or curiosity; 'a petty commodity' (J.), a knick-knack, trinket, gewgaw; hence (often in allusion to ó) applied to anything small, flimsy, or inferior of its kind (Oxford English Dictionary)

A thing of little or no value or importance, a trifle; a foolish or senseless affair, a piece of nonsense; pl. *trumpery*, *rubbish*. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Toys are among the most important human artefacts. They are learning tools that illuminate our culture. By guiding play, they foster imagination, creativity and critical thinking and help us imagine what's next (The Strong Museum of Play).

Most of us would probably agree with Mergen, who states that toys are the material artefacts of play (1983, 103). Toys are produced for play and meant to be played with. Unless humans were able to play, it is doubtful that the category of toys would have emerged. As the quotes above demonstrate, the attitudes towards the language in which toys are spoken of depend largely on who is speaking of them. The English language, at least when looking at one of the definitions provided by OED, seems to diminish the toy. When looking at the definition given by The Strong Museum of Play based in Rochester, New York state, we quickly come to a conclusion that not everyone agrees on the historical (and regrettably conventional) way of addressing toys as artefacts with 'no value' or as 'nonsense'. Still, how toys are looked at by the great majority of people in western societies is exactly this. How toys are discussed also comes to reveal attitudes towards the activity that justifies their existence in our material world – play.

By many definitions, toys are seen as useless trifles that only bring temporary happiness to the player and are easily replaced by new ones. As a toy player myself, it is unnatural for me to take a commonplace, dismissive attitude towards these objects. However, as a researcher I understand that the terminology linked to my subject of study must be critically explored. The following chapters introduce major theoretical concepts related to the culture(s) of toy play; first the one of 'wow', secondly the 'toy' and thirdly, the one of 'play'. Moreover, I will suggest the concept of 'toy play' as a subcategory of object play, an area of play research that is in need of further assessment, particularly when considering mature interest in playthings. The goal is to formulate and theorize toy play first from the viewpoint of what makes a toy attractive and gives it *play value*.

Toys: Tools, instruments, artefacts that wow

This chapter opens up the first of the three main topics of the thesis. In the following discussion, I would further like to propose the concept of 'wow' as a point of entry. In this part I will aim at sketching an outlook on how toys may be viewed as tools, instruments and artefacts that 'wow' us. In other words, I will shed light on the history of playthings – where toys came from and touch briefly upon how they have developed from historical artefacts into post-modern playthings, inform the reader about the current toy industry and elaborate on what is meant when we discuss toy design and the designers that work for the industry. Mass-marketed toys are always investments and the decision to buy one may be based on a long forethought, or on the other hand, a sudden impulse. Purchasing a toy always involves some level of assessment regarding the value of the toy. The chapter at hand will end with a discussion on play value and how the educationalists and industry representatives define a *good toy*.

One of the central terms in toy culture is the 'wow'. The 'wow-ness' or wow-ability of toys, or rather, the *experience of wow* is something that is central to the first encounter with a toy. The wow is what mesmerizes us first and makes our curiosity hungry for more.

The *wow experience* is probably something that each of us may relate to. Yet it is a concept that is rarely discussed in theories, at least not by referring directly to *wow*. According to Henry Jenkins, "'wow' is an old vaudeville term. The moment of peak spectacle and maximum emotional impact in an act became known as the "wow" climax, the "wow finish" or simply the "big wow". ...Vaudeville was not about telling stories; it was about putting on a show" (Jenkins, 2007b, 4).

Wow is exactly about that – a soul-stirring spectacle that makes us 'go wow'. There might be a thousand words to explain the experienced wow, or again, it is something that cannot be grasped, firsthand, in words. The wow effect, or 'X factor', is what every toy company aims at when innovating novel toys. But as will be later shown in this book, most toys fulfil the requirement of playability, some give the players play value, but only a few make the player 'go wow'.³⁴

Before moving on to a short history of playthings as their development is presented in this thesis, I would like to bring up some further ideas about wow as it is discussed in the contemporary world. As a point of reference, I would like to bring up the wow experience

³⁴ Wow is an often cited term in the toy industry. For example, Mattel uses the "wow" as a sole marketing word in the campaign for Barbie in 2012 (See e.g. the cover of the *Toys'N'Playthings* magazine, June 2012, Vol. 31, Nr. 9).

as related to architecture. Institutional architecture often aims to wow and sometimes succeeds at this. As an example, the lively debate in spring 2012 around the Guggenheim museum planned to be built in Finland brought up wow in the architectural context. In an article published in Helsingin Sanomat, the leading Finnish daily newspaper, the former manager of the Kiasma Contemporary Art Museum, Tuula Karjalainen, expressed her concern for the fading effect that ‘architecture with characteristics of wow’ (in Finnish ‘arkkitehtuurin wau-piirteet’) would have on the number of visitors, once the first 3–5 years of the museum were over.³⁵ Further examples from the same context address groundbreaking Finnish architecture from the perspective of wow-ness: “The first reaction”, writes journalist Hannu Pöppönen in Helsingin Sanomat in May 2012, “really was wow”, about his encounter with the elliptical plastic house *Futuro*, designed by Finnish Matti Suuronen in 1968. A journalist, again, wrote about hearing an academic sigh of ‘Wow’ [Finnish ‘wau’] when first visiting the new library of Helsinki University (Autio 2012, C3).



Matti Suuronen's *Futuro* house as displayed at the Emma Art Museum, Espoo, Finland, summer of 2012. If scaled down, this house could probably easily be perceived as a toy vehicle for action figures.

³⁵ See Sirén, Vesa, “Näin kootaan Guggenheim-vuosi”, [This is how you build up a year of Guggenheim], 28.4.2012, *HS*, C1.

What becomes interesting here is a comparison between the aims of institutional and innovative architecture and the work of toy designers and toy companies. For many, it may come as a surprise that although there are many classic toys which clearly have maintained their wow throughout the years, the market for toys is insatiable for playthings that make one ‘go wow’. What I mean by this is that the search for the wow seems to be endless in toy design, whereas we might expect wow in the context of other areas of culture and design only in relation to the singular monumental pieces and projects.

Jenkins asks how we may study the “wowness” of popular art and replies in the following way: ‘Insofar as all elements of popular media are shaped by this push toward intense emotional experience, we need to examine popular texts from multiple perspectives’ (Jenkins, 2007b, 9). Toys may well be looked at as the popular texts Jenkins refers to. However, leaning too much on only one area of culture such as pop culture would not do justice to the contemporary toy, nor the richness of cultural contexts it is surrounded by. This idea of multiple perspectives allows myself thus on the first hand, to turn to different realms and to study the phenomenon at hand e.g. through the cultures of the visual and the material both of which relate strongly to the work of toy designers.

The first aim in a thesis on toy play is to study the contemporary understanding of the term ‘toy.’ How we name things determines what they are perceived to be, how they are used and thought about (Greenhalgh, 1997, 46). The ‘wow’ element, again, is a prerequisite for new, mass-produced toys to enter the marketplace. As showed by Jenkins’ thoughts above, wow refers to putting on a show, mastering a kind of spectacle that – at least for a moment – presents a breathtaking moment for the audience. One example of a historical definition of the toy represents a rather different viewpoint for regarding a plaything. As we have seen and as stated in the Oxford English Dictionary, a *toy* is: ‘A thing of little or no value or importance, a trifle; a foolish or senseless affair, a piece of nonsense; pl. trumpery, rubbish’. The values attached to toys have, however, changed and it would be naïve to think of toys as meaningless objects.

It does not seem sensible to suggest that the word ‘toy’ is somehow fundamentally lacking in reality. And yet it doesn’t really have that kind of given, unitary meaning. A plastic plaything is actually quite a complex object. Recognizing it as a toy is precisely that – an act of recognition. Such recognitions depend on settings, prior experience, culturally-derived associations and so on (Fleming, 1996, 9).

Toys are a big industry, says play scholar Peter Smith. But as he reminds us, toys are not synonymous with play (2010, 215). In discussing toys, says Sutton-Smith, we must also keep in mind the ‘the ambiguity of the referent’, in other words the question regarding: *is that an object or a toy?* (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 2). As Fleming notes in the quote above, toys are complex objects, although in their physical form they may be quite simple as well:

DrT: A toy is an object, it could be anything out from a stone, stick, box or a created object that brings out the response on the part of a child, or an adult, or an animal.

When I discuss toys in this thesis, I sometimes use ‘plaything’ as a synonym. The reason for this is that although Smith wisely points out that a toy does not automatically mean play, it is something *produced* for play. Therefore, the mass-marketed toy under scrutiny, also needs to be acknowledged as a product. What is important to note, is that toys in this book also are referred to as *things, objects* and *artefacts*.

Objects embody unique information about the nature of man in society, writes Pearce (1994, 125). The toys as discussed in this thesis are mainly the purposely designed, mass-produced artefacts and industrial products understood as a cornerstone of contemporary cultures of play. My main point is to demonstrate that toys are meant to be used *in play*. Consequently, the foundation of my hypothesis lies in the idea that when used, the toy is actually *played* with.

Studying toys from the perspective of artefacts is important, as the mass-produced toy is a tactile, produced object. According to Pearce, artefact study is concerned with many areas such as the material (including raw material, design, construction and technology) history (including a descriptive account of its function and user environment involving all its spatial relationships); and lastly, significance (which embraces its emotional and psychological messages). “The sum of our understanding of these properties may be described as the interpretation”, says Pearce (1994, 126).

KH: How do you define a toy?

DrT: A toy is an artefact that is used in play. Children use a tremendous amount of other things than toys in their play [...] but if an artefact is used in play, one may call it a toy.

In the words of Dr.Toy, Stevanne Auerbach, any artefact used in play may be understood as a toy. But as an industrially produced artefact, the toy must be defined more thoroughly. Thus, toys as products in general, may be inspected 1) as *artefacts*, and specifically 2) as *affording action* (play). In addition to the definitions provided by the OED and quoted in the beginning of this chapter, the dictionary also acknowledges another clarification of what a toy may be:

A material object for children or others to play with (often an imitation of some familiar object); a plaything; also, something contrived for amusement rather than for practical use (esp. in phrase a mere toy) (Oxford English Dictionary).

Toy as non-game

In the thinking of toy/game designer Haim Shafir, toys are games that come with no premeditated rules (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author’s notes). Donald Norman makes a distinction between free play and games by defining games with a statement that games are more organized than play, with at least agreed-upon rules. Games have a goal and usually some scoring mechanism and as result tend to be competitive, with winners and losers (Norman, 2004, 130). As seen in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the boundaries between toys and other playthings such as games of sorts (both digital and analogue) are blurring and toys cannot be seen, anymore, as Hartmann and Brougère note, as ‘stable objects’:

A toy is not a stable object, identical in all places wherever it is found. It varies materially and functionally in the way it is designed, produced, and distributed. A toy varies also in what it represents, in the values attributed to it, and finally in the way children are given access to the toy, the space reserved for its use, and the rules and regulations associated with it (Hartmann & Brougère, 2004, 51).

Toy as a gift

‘A toy is a most suitable gift for a child’ writes Sarigny, and continues by claiming that ‘these small objects, pretty or ugly, clean or dirty, are a comfort to a child, often a best and closest friend and if one may call it so – an educator’ (Sarigny, 1971, 6). The quote above claims that the toy is a suitable gift. Further, it admits the antropomorphic use of a plaything as a friend. Finally, it underlines a significantly important idea of the function of toys as an educational media. Children are key recipients of gifts in the form of toys

(Walker & Chaplin, 1997, 181). The gift helps to maintain the social bond between the two parties - the parents and children. Sutton-Smith sees that each usage of the toy brings gratification to the parent who made the investment in it, 'and it equally brings mild despair if it is quickly discarded and becomes junk underfoot' (Sutton-Smith, 1986, 21).

According to a study reported in the *Young Consumers* journal in 2005, in order to make decisions when purchasing toys for their children, European parents identified three main elements: They rely greatly on the child (89%), they want quality toys (75%) and, third, the price needs to be attractive (68%). One of the differences between children's and adult toy purchasing behavior is the fact that as the former may affect the purchasing decision of a toy quite often, the latter may actually buy a toy for oneself whenever s/he pleases. Although children are known to save up money in order to buy a toy, it occurs quite often that toys are bought and given to children as gifts. Adults receive toys as gifts as well, but the contemporary toy purchase is often a gift for oneself. The notion of gift is a philosophically interesting starting point, to ponder upon toys as artefacts that are often given to the child, but created and bought by the adult. Most toys owned by children were received as gifts given by adults with specific experiences in mind. According to Chudacoff, toys are given for many reasons; 'ostensibly as a means to provide happiness but also to promote education (blocks), comfort (stuffed animals), stimulus to the imagination (crayons), companionship (dolls), simulation of adult activity (miniature tools and tea sets)' (2007, 6).

Gifts and souvenirs are typical products whose practical function is of secondary importance (at least at the moment of giving and remembering), says Vihma (1995, 60). The majority of toys that are bought for children, are given as gifts – for birthdays and at Christmastime. Giving toys as gifts results eventually in an abundance of them, but we must keep in mind that toys given as gifts also relate to how the toy givers and the experiences of play are remembered.

The critique towards toys is very common, at least when discussing children and their relations to toys. For instance, in many cases educators take a different standpoint to toys than the industrial forces behind mass-marketed toys. Furthermore, it is also the gift-giver, in most cases the adult – parent or grandparent, aunt or uncle who is responsible for the choices made in purchasing the toy.

Helenius claims that adults often offer children toys without thinking if the child really needs them, or whether the toy collection of the child caters for imaginative play. In some cases, 'a toy kills play', says Helenius. Sometimes, on the other hand, play is killed because of lack of suitable tools (1991, 120).

Toy as an intentional tool/non-utensil

As Karjalainen notes, we are constantly in communication with different artefacts. Whatever we do, he says, there is always an arsenal of artefacts related to that particular activity. A tool differs from an artefact in that it could not exist without our intentional actions (1995, 120–121). Following Karjalainen's idea, if a toy is seen as a tool, then our intentionality that lies behind it must be related to play. Just like in work, in play the tool must fit its user. The idea of the toy as an educational tool is fitting, as toys have for a long time been used to promote learning (Sutton-Smith, 1986, 28). It is here the questions considering the epistemological dimensions of the toy become tricky. According to Immanuel Kant, art is purposiveness without purpose. In a way, the concept of toys captures the same idea; their intentionally designed purpose is to function as things used in play, but they might not include direct guidelines for more specific uses of the object apart from the obvious suggestion of being played with. Utilitarian design, again, focuses on the practical benefits a product and if the toy is considered to have utilitarian and therefore, epistemological value, it lies precisely in this idea of the toy as a *tool*, mostly a tool for (intended) learning but also, as noted by Chudacoff, a tool that may be used to gain happiness, comfort, companionship and stimulus to imagination. It is up to the player how to utilize the plaything and to actualize its various potential.



Lelusäilö [Toy 'storage']. The pale blue plastic box found at the game company where I work has been turned into a tool box at some point. Funnily enough, the person in charge decided to literally name it a toy storage, 2012.

Interaction with tools is valuable because it promotes the cultivation of new experiences and goals, say Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, 84–85). However, toys are not tools in the traditional sense and can thus also be categorized as non-utensils. As Walker defines them, they are non-utitarian products: Although they serve a purpose, they are not practical implements or utensils. Instead, these objects may be used to express identity, ‘to be decorative, to enhance one’s appearance, or to indicate one’s rank, achievement or affiliation’ (2006, 38).

Toy as education

According to many, the task of play is to develop a child’s physical, mental and social skills. It has clear objectives depending on the developmental age of the child. The following question, the one regarding the educational value of the toy, is something that needs further assessment.

It is a growing trend in toys that they are marketed with more utilitarian and beneficial values than ‘mere’ fun. When left alone with the toy, the child should then be not only happily occupied with the toy, but also and at the same time, educated by it.

As Dea Birkett points out, toys of today are often spoken of in the name of education. ‘Today’s toys are supposed to be not only excellent parents, but fine educators as well’. But as Goldstein talks of “so-called educational toys”, he asks at the same time “What toys aren’t educational? What toy could prevent a child from being imaginative and creative?” (Birkett, 2006, 56–57). Obviously, different toys promote different promises regarding educational qualities.

In the study carried out by the Young Consumers Journal, educational value was identified by 74% of parents across Europe as their primary quality for a toy. Value for money and long-term amusement were joint second most important factors, with 69% each (*Young Consumers*, 2005).

Toy as a cultural, socializing object

According to Pesce, toys are valuable as they may help the child to guide him or herself into culture and because they serve as playgrounds ‘where rehearsals for reality can proceed without constraint or self-consciousness’ (2000, 4–5). The toy is like a blend of adult dreams and conceptions about childhood and what is appropriate for a child (Riihonen, 1991, 47). Most often it is a compilation of ideas of children and childhood in the mind of the adult: A toy is at the same time ‘an abstraction distilled into concrete form’ (Phoenix, 2006, 7) and something that ‘may be likened to three-dimensional books for the mind and body – to learn from and experiment with’ (Wachtel, 2012).

In sum, in the western world, toys are cultural messages created and mostly bought by adults, but intended for children (Rossie, 2005, 132).

Of all the cultural objects given to young children, argues Brian Sutton-Smith, toys are the most salient because they provide a flexible and engaging tool for socialization. Middle-class children are given an enormous number of toys (tool sets, mini-kitchens, baseballs, dolls) because they are ‘models of things’ that invoke in play the behaviours or skills required in later life (Hline, 1993, 15).

According to Lönnqvist, social anthropology sees toys and play as a tool for socialization, whereas ethnographic studies mainly stress production of toys from the viewpoint of handicraft and homecrafts, art and cultural history (1991, 19). The concept of traditional homecrafts may seem distant when considering the contemporary toy, but when thinking about the importance of tactility in a plaything, it becomes obvious that the sensory experiencing of the toy is central to both toy design and the toy player. For Prown notes that what comes first when we interact with an artefact is sensory engagement, and at the second stage the intellectual apprehension of the object. Last in the order is the emotional response to the object (1994, 134–136). As the results of the study at hand reveal, toys ultimately also become tools for socialization for adults. Moreover, as we will see when studying the toy playing adult, connections are made with the activity of crafting.³⁶



³⁶ The trend of crafting has come to have an effect on toy design in terms of development of new toy characters as well. On a visual level, e.g. the LaLaLoopsy dolls can be seen as contemporary ‘ragdolls’ in which the eyes are made of buttons and the appearance follows the ‘crafted’ look by mimicking i.e. stitching. Another example are the Piggy Wiggies which started as a toy made of an old sock.



A short history of playthings

Designers are always interested in creating something new. In order to do this they need an understanding of the present to be able to use that as a starting point, claims Battarbee (2004, 28). Before entering the play space of the current trends by referring to the area of contemporary toys, I will touch lightly on the subject of history by discussing the development of toys from their beginnings to how they are perceived today.

To refer to the history of playthings as a short development would of course be a wrongful way to treat the subject. The cultural history of toys has perhaps been the most apparent topic in past writings on the subject. In other words, an extensive literary base exists for those who want to widen their understanding of where toys originated,

how they were made and in what ways people of the past used, or rather, played with historical toys. In the context of this thesis, however, a brief introduction of the history of toys will serve my purpose.

Playthings have been able to carry across times ideas that have become serious elements of adult activities. As Soini notes (1991, 7) the idea for an air plane was established thousands of years ago in the form of kites. The compass was formerly a plaything, as was gun powder used for fireworks.

At the same time, adult activities and their relations to play have varied during different periods of time. Because of this, Yrjö Hirn stresses the importance of play research as a means to understand cultural development and human activity. As Soini writes, playthings are historical remains and children's play one subculture that alongside cultural history preserves something that would otherwise be forgotten and lost (1991, 7). To arrive at the roots of the history of playthings, I have employed an extensive selection of books written about different categories of toys and looked at how the most recognized theorists of play address playthings on a historical level. Although the history of toys goes hand in hand with the history of play, as shown by Almqvist (1992), it is important to note that when looking at the history of toys, we are looking at a tradition that is much younger than the history of play:

Children's toys have existed as long as human civilization. Attitudes to children's playthings have always depended on attitudes to play. The history of play, however, is to great extent a history without playthings (Almqvist, 1992, 248).

Brian Sutton-Smith notes that society without toys is a relatively passive, routine society (*The Psychology of Toys and Play*, 3). Thinking along these lines, it would be easy to say that society with a lot of toys is truly a pioneering one. Although this thesis concentrates on western societies, it must be said that each part of the world has their own playthings which have obviously contributed to the development of their cultures. What we know about toys from the past is mainly due to anthropologists, ethnologists and archaeologists, claims Almqvist (1992, 248).

The art of the toy is universal, varied and historic. We are fortunate to witness the rich diversity of toy design in each country, varying approaches, materials, cultural heritage, strong traditions, many creative designers, and many different and influential styles within each country, yet many toys do translate across borders and have universal appeal and consistency (Auerbach, 2009, 1).

In the beginning of the 1900s, Finnish Yrjö Hirn wrote that a complete cultural history of our times can hardly be written without allowing a chapter for playthings (Soini, 1991, 5, orig. Hirn, 1916, 8). Nor can a thesis about toy play neglect to address toys from their historical perspective. By looking at the history of toys and the contemporary culture around these artefacts, we can see that much has changed not only because of development in terms of used raw materials, but larger developments mainly tied to understandings of media culture, socialization and playing audiences.

Some of the toy types that the history of toys presents have become universal playthings like the ball. According to Riihonen (1991, 122), with its 6 000 years of history, the ball is regarded as the oldest plaything.

What is of particular interest when considering the thesis at hand, is the development of the toys that I have chosen to pay closer attention to in my study, namely dolls, action figures and soft toys. According to Jenvey, in ancient times, toy-like objects such as ‘doll-like miniature human forms’, may have been used at ceremonial occasions. Once the ceremony was completed, these artefacts were discarded by the adults (Jenvey, 1996, 105).³⁷



Wooden toys designed by Finnish designer Kaj Franck in the 1940s and as displayed at the Hevosenkenttä Toy Museum in Espoo, Finland in summer 2012.

What has been found from excavations of children’s graves thousands of years old, are objects in the form of miniatures of different kinds such as animals and human-looking figures which were probably used as dolls (Almqvist, 1992, 248). Dolls as playthings were probably first enjoyed by children in Egypt, since such remains have been found there in excavated tombs, notes Foley (1962, 30).

³⁷ However, there are contradictory ways of looking at the beginnings of toy culture: ‘The first toys of prehistory are regarded by the art historian as sculpture, and not as toys at all’, writes Accorsi, (1968, 7). It has been suggested that toys as a category of artefacts to be used in play were unknown in prehistoric societies because life then was too hard and dangerous for such luxuries (Culff, 1969, 10–11).

The history of European toys began in Central Europe. “Nuremberg is the home of the tin soldier”, writes Walter Benjamin. The oldest known doll house comes from Munich (Benjamin, 2005a, 113). Like the fashion doll, the doll house was originally – and often still is – an adult amusement. Its origins lay in the crèche, which is found from the Middle Ages on, particularly in Italy and France (Stewart, 1993, 61). At first these were only artefacts made of valuable materials in churches. Characters for cribs in ordinary homes were made i.e. of wood, clay or paper pulp. Often these characters were either painted or given clothes (Holstikko-Ojanen, 2009, 12).

Doll-makers living in Nuremberg are mentioned as early as 1413 (Hillier, 1965, 46). The first dolls produced of clay in this city may have functioned as souvenirs for pilgrims and businessmen who passed the city while travelling (Nelson & Svensson, 2005, 12–13). Nuremberg gave the wooden toys their trade name, writes Foley, ‘for it became the great distributing depot for the rural and village toy makers in the eighteenth century. Children everywhere heard their wooden playthings referred to as “Nuremberg toys”’ (Foley, 1962, 55). According to Ariès, even Louis XIII played with a German cabinet with wooden miniatures made by Nuremberg craftsmen (1996, 62).

The fame of Nuremberg as a toy center rested wholly on the fact that it had long been the chief collection point in South Germany for cheap, homemade toys and, indeed, the ancient guild system, which remained in force in Nuremberg longer than almost anywhere else, long precluded the establishment of anything like a toy factory in the proper sense (Hertz, 1969, 258).

By 1900, companies located in the German Empire controlled 60% of the world market. This astonishing figure paled against their domination (95% of domestic consumption). In 1890, Germany exported 27.8 Million Marks of toys and 40 million Marks five years later. By 1901 this figure reached 53 million Marks, in 1906 70.5 million Marks, and in 1911 90.1 million Marks. On the eve of World War I, the Reich accounted for 125 million out of 230 million Marks of world toy production (Ganaway, 2008, 372).

Basing his analysis on a painting by Pieter Brueghel, Lönnqvist states that ordinary playthings in the 16th and 17th centuries were hobby horses, spinning wheels, balls, stilts, barrel wheels, dolls and doll cribs (1991, 22).

As Benjamin points out, toys such as tin soldiers or animals from Noah’s ark were not originally the invention of toy manufacturers, but were produced in the workshops of wood carvers, pewterers, and so forth. Not until the nineteenth century did toy making become the province of a branch industry of its own (Benjamin, 2005a, 113).

The number and range of toys grew explosively in the West during the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). Playing started to be seen to have a value in itself. Consequently, the nurseries of the bourgeoisie became filled with playthings (Lidbeck & Nilsson, 1991, 25).

An interesting point is made by Sutton-Smith, who claims that toys became personal possessions and the first form of private property for children by the end of the 1700s. Previously, he notes, where toys had existed, they had been shared collectively by the family (1986, 120). This idea of shared ownership (and play as a socially shared experience) resonates with the casual gaming platforms such as the traditional board games of today.



A German tin squirrel toy from the 1940s as exhibited in the Istanbul Toy Museum, 2011.

Small scale industrial production of toys begun in Finland in the beginning of the 1800s. (Rassi, 2012). Dolls have been industrially produced in Finland since year 1888 when the toy factory Lelutehdas Suomi was established. The best known 'Made in Finland' dolls are the so-called Martta dolls, designed by the Martta organization and started from 1908 onwards. The heads for the dolls came from Germany, but the textiles for their clothing were woven locally. In the 1970s imported dolls took

over the markets (Avomaa, 2012, 33). In Finland, dolls were sold at exhibitions and market places. In the beginning of the 20th century, toys in Finland were made out of hardened cardboard. Inspiration for models was sought for in Germany, Russia and

other Scandinavian countries (Rassi, 2012).³⁸ The spreading of toys in the 19th century Europe was closely linked with bourgeoisie Christmas traditions. This came to affect the scientific view on playthings as objects of leisure and collections.

Seen from the perspective of cultural history and collecting, the plaything became, according to Lönnqvist, an object of knowledge that told the story of cultural differences, level of development, the history of arts & crafts as well as the expressional social and aesthetic needs of different ages (1991, 18). Also, in the second half of the nineteenth century, notes Benjamin, and adds "when the long term decline in these things begins", toys became larger with the small and 'the playful' all to disappear (Benjamin, 2005a, 114).³⁹ The typical pedagogical function of playthings was captured in the doll house of the 1500s, which preserved its leading position as a mirror of the world view of the upper classes into the beginning of the 1900s (Lönnqvist, 1981, 63). However this toy-type came to afford different play patterns as well. The doll house is a toy that is not only manipulated by hand, but consumed by the eye, Stewart notes (1993, 62). Earlier writings on the history of toys do not say much about the dolls that inhabited the doll houses, but they have a great deal to say about the 'fashion dolls' of the coeval times, as the quote from Constance demonstrates:

The waxed and composition lady-dolls, often made to look like fashionable women of the turn of the century, could not have held any great appeal for children, since their clothes often could not be removed and the figures themselves were too fragile to withstand nursery life. Presumably it was elder sisters and mothers who stood these figures on their dressing tables to be admired, despite the fact that they were marketed by their German makers as play items (Constance, 1977, 547).

The history of the early 'character toys' begins at an early stage. According to Walsh, the Raggedy Ann doll is the longest continuously licensed character in the toy industry (Walsh, 2005, 38). Also, nineteenth century children's books were sometimes accompanied by

³⁸ There is toy-making history in my own home town of Pori, Finland as well; Max Tamlander began the production of doll house furniture in Pori in 1870 (Rassi, 2012).

³⁹ It is interesting to compare the situation described to the era, during which I have enjoyed toys myself, (beginning from 1980s until this time) as toys in miniature format have prevailed on the market, mostly in the form of collectable toys. Compactness is even considered a virtue in the contemporary playthings, as it allows the toy to be mobile and does not take much space in the places of play, such as the home.

a small figure that “allowed the child creatively to extend the possibilities of the written story” (Hilton, 1996, 20 cited in Panton, 1996, 193). As will be discussed later, licensed toys share this very idea of extended storytelling.

In Finland, wood became an important raw material for toys: The wooden Jukka-toys made by Finnish Juho Jussila are considered classics. Their production started in the 1920s (Rassi, 2012). Bergen writes of the 1920s as a time when many board games had already in the previous twenty years, been designed for adults as well as children. The pages of the *Playthings magazine* reveal a trend toward toys designed principally for adults and an increasing willingness to treat children as part of the adult world (Bergen, 1982). 1930s continued the emphasis on adult play. “We are – all of us – children at heart”, advised the *Playthings magazine* in April 1940, and urged grown-ups to play and stay young (Bergen, 1982, 110, 112).

Pedagogical ideas started to show more and more in toys in the 1930s. Knowledge was sought for in Germany. Toys have always followed their times and toy design has sought inspiration from reality: In the 1930s and 1940s war started to impact the production of toy factories when guns and canons were produced as playthings for children. After the wars any toy that communicated violence was hallmarked as a “bad toy”, notes Rassi (2012).



A soft toy E.T. photographed at The Istanbul Toy Museum, 2011.



Plastic Rody toys in a shop window in San Francisco, 2012.



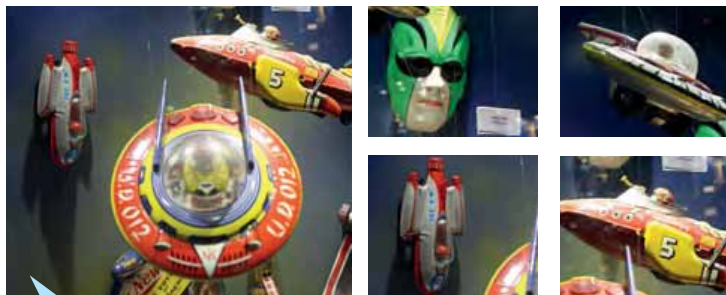
Old and more recent examples of Finnish license toys: From The Moomin family to the Angry Birds characters as seen at 'The good, the bad and the funny toys' exhibition at the Hevosenkenttä Toy Museum in Espoo, Finland, 20.3.2012 – 10.3.2013.

Walt Disney, with the first Mickey Mouse toys appearing in 1928, was a pioneer in the commercialisation of ‘toyish’ figures. The most popular fictional figures turned into character toys in Finland are Tove Jansson’s Moomin characters (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). If the 1930s seemed to have been dominated by Disney-inspired toys, the toys and games of the 1940s continued to follow trends in publishing, radio, and motion pictures, says Bergen (1982, 113).

In Finland a brief stint of artist-designed toys occurred: Renowned designers Eva Gardberg, Ilmari Tapiovaara and Kaj Franck designed toys in the 1930s and 1940s. Franck designed two series of wooden toys in the 1940s. In Kaj Franck’s toy collection there were almost 100 toys which Franck had sketched on parchment. Amberg and Suomi note that only few doll-like toys were probably produced of these designs (1997, 109). However, these toys remained a curiosity in the history of Finnish toy making. According to Lehto (1996, 121-122) the majority of the consumers were not interested in the artistic ambitions or the result of design work.

'In 1945 came the baby boom and in the U.S. this resulted in an unprecedented demand for toys', writes Monks (2011, 25). This development resulted mainly in demand for the mass-produced toys, but some designer toys were produced as well: In 1951, Danish designer Kay Bojesen designed *The Monkey* – a wooden toy made of teak and limba, which became a design classic. Bojesen created other treasured and beloved toy characters 'to the child within us all'. One of his design principles for the wooden animal toys was for them to never be exact replicas of nature.⁴⁰

In Finland, plastic was tried as a production material in the beginning of the 1950s, but eventually, wood was deemed better than plastic because of its 'warmth' (Rassi, 2012). In the 50s and 60s, the UK effectively led the world's toy industry, but the production of toys became heavily dependent of Asia: Having access to cheap labour in Hong Kong changed the entire toy business (Monks, 2011, 44). But from the 1950s onward, notes Chudacoff, the multitude of mass-produced and mass-marketed playthings narrowed the concept of play 'so that in the minds of adults and children alike toys came to be equated with play' (Chudacoff, 2007, 168).



Tin plate toys at the Istanbul Toy Museum, 2011.

In Japan, the mass-marketed toys started out, after the Second World War, as metal playthings built from the recycled tin cans of American GIs and were intended for children overseas. Japan had become a significant exporter of toys during the First World War (Monks, 2011, 26). The upswing of plastic toys begun after the Second World War. Plastic was a perfectly suitable material for toys as it was economical, durable and

⁴⁰ See http://www.kaybojesen-denmark.com/About_Kay_Bojesen.aspx.

colourful (Rassi, 2012). According to Phoenix, the modern toy could not exist without plastics. He writes:

A plastic toy can break free from the limitations of wood or tin to assume complex forms. It can faithfully reproduce a drawn object that formerly had no place in reality. It can do this with ultimate fidelity to impossible shape and unreal color-permanent, unscratchable, and resistant to water or sunlight (Phoenix, 2006, 7).

By the mid-1950s materials such as vinyl, plastic and battery-run electronics were used in the construction and designs of robots, monsters and cyborgs; characters that were, according to Allison, 'crafted more for the tastes of a burgeoning consumer population at home whose youth were being raised on manga, anime, and TV action heroes' (Allison, 2006, 65).⁴¹

The 1950s was the time for two important character toys to see daylight: In Finland Atelier Fauni was the first company to license Tove Jansson's Moomin characters for toys. The production for these Finnish character toys begun in mid-1950s (Rassi, 2012). Barbie's arrival in 1959 on the other hand, relates to the rise of consumer prosperity (Bergen, 1982, 114).

Finnish design company Aarikka produced toys from the late 1960s to 1980s. The sortiment included do-it-yourself toys as well, for example the *Nakurit* series designed by Anna Tauriala, wooden human and animal figures, which the child could paint and shape (Rassi, 2012). These toys can be seen to communicate the ideas that later became widely communicated in the DIY toys perhaps most connected with the designer toy scene of today.

The real boom of toys in the age of the media took place in the 20th century along with the proliferation of the moving image (*Of Toys and Men*, exhibition press materials). By the late 1980s, as much as 70 percent of gross toy sales consisted of licensed toys – 'those plastic replicas of television characters' (Kline, 1993, 147).

Star Wars is one of the biggest commercial successes in contemporary toy culture. The toys licensed for the first film actually outsold the film (del Vecchio, 2003, 144). Around the world, notes Fleming, 'you could eat, drink and wear Star Wars' (Fleming, 1996, 93). The continuing success of Star Wars can still be seen. For example according to a search made by myself in January 2012, Amazon.com listed 13 880 results for the

⁴¹ The first TV commercial for a toy aired on April the 30th, 1952 when Hassenfeld Brothers (later Hasbro) 'did something that no other company had ever done'. In other words, they put the character toy Mr. Potatohead on television (Walsh, 2005, 99).

search words 'Toys&Games + Star Wars'. The film and toy tie-in industry in its entirety is a phenomenon for which we can thank Star Wars, claims Clark (2007, 173). The 'commercial everywhere-ness of Star Wars' as expressed by Kapell and Shelton (2006, 1) is a result of the perfect marriage between a mythic movie series and both creative and commercial ambitions made possible by the licensing industry. In Scandinavia, Star Wars toys are currently sold both to children and adults (Sörbring, 2011).



Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker characters photographed at The Istanbul Toy Museum, 2011.

The toy industry

Cultural industries make businesses out of entertainment and play, says Kline (2005, 219). The toy industry as a commercial provider of play is one of the most prominent examples of a subcategory of the creative economy. Jeremy Rifkin has argued that in postindustrial hypercapitalism, "play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy" (Kline, 2005, 244).

The cultural history of toys reveals to us, that the actual plaything as an industrial product is a relatively young phenomenon; it connects to the industrialization of the 1800s and the rise of mechanical production. It, on one hand, tells about an adult conception of what it is to be a child, and on the other hand of how children in different times have functioned in society either to respond to the rules or acted outside of the contemporary and social norms as directed by adults.

The plaything – as a means for play and as a product, may be seen as a mirror of culture, the result of human behaviour (Lönnqvist, 1981, 61).

This part of the chapter deals with the plaything in reference to the industry dedicated to the making and marketing of toys. As seen in the previous passage, the history of the business of toys follows the lines of the development of the commodities industry: First, toys were the handiwork of guild members but as the techniques of production developed, the plaything could be produced in larger volumes. Innovations in science were made more known through playful objects. Innovations in raw materials such as the developing of plastics had a significant impact both on the production and play patterns related to toys. In the following, I will reflect shortly on and bridge the historical situation with what is happening in the toy industry today.

The German toy production became industrialized in the 1800s. Mechanical toys became the most important selling line of this time (Lönnqvist, 1981, 64). Actual toy factories would, however, not be established until the nineteenth century, notes Hoch (2010–2011, 111). The golden age of toy production is seen to have taken place during the period between 1860–1930. The centre for this was Germany, from which toy products in the 1900s spread across the world (Lönnqvist, 1981, 63). To compare with developments in the Nordic countries; Lelutehdas Suomi was the first actual toy factory in Finland. It was established in 1888 (Rassi, 2012).



Tin plate tram as seen at The Istanbul Toy Museum, 2011.

As we have seen previously, the Central-European countries such as Germany and France were the most important sources for toys at the dawn of the industrial age of toy production. At least from the 1830s onwards, notes Hertz, toy manufacturing became a relatively big business in the United States as well (Hertz, 1969, 260). Nuremberg in Germany continues as the ‘toy capital’ of Europe – not so much because Germany would still be the leading toy manufacturer, but mostly due to historical reasons. We do know that Nuremberg, a cultural centre at the crossroads of many trade routes, in the early years of industrialization, became the hub of Germany’s toy industry.

Nuremberg was home to the first toymaker guilds, the first known professional associations of toy inventors (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 42). The first German Toy Fair was staged in Nuremberg in 1950 (Monks, 2011, 89). The city still hosts one of the most important annual toy industry events, Spielwarenmesse, the Nuremberg International Toy Fair.

The toy business is very much an industry of family businesses, note Ladensohn Stern and Schoenhaus (1990, 25). The European Union has some 2 000 toy companies (Clark, 2007, 116). The U.S. toy industry to many equals *the* toy industry. It accounts for close to half the world’s toy business claims Clark (2007, 21). According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS), there were about 187 000 U.S. workers in toy-related industries in 2007 (Torpey, 2008, 4).

An article in the *Economist* from 2008 about toy companies Playmobil (from Germany) and Lego (from Denmark) and claims that in Europe they are cultural giants, whereas in America ‘these firms may be dwarfed in America by titans like Mattel’. Britain, again, is considered to be closer to the American market in terms of “Anglo-Saxon” toy taste (*Economist*, 2/2/2008).

The first of the two U.S. based ‘global toy giants’ – Hasbro was founded in 1923. Mattel was founded in 1942. It is the global leader in toy sales (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 53). A majority of their products of these (and many other toy companies) are produced in Asia. ‘The dominance of China in toy production is staggering’, writes Clark. There are about 8 000 toy factories, employing 3 million workers (Clark, 2007, 196).

There are over 150 000 toys available in the marketplace as reported by the Toy Industry Association (Auerbach, 2009, 19; www.tia.org). Each year, 6 000 to 7 000 new playthings are introduced at the annual American International Toy Fair in New York City. Fifty percent of these items may have disappeared by the following Christmas (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 5).

At the international toy fair in New York in February 2012 more than 100 000 products were on display at the Jacob Javits Convention Center (Toy Industry Association Inc. Press release, 2012). To compare, at the Nuremberg International Toy Fair 2012

the organizers estimated the show to be visited by some 80 000 trade visitors, 2 776 companies exhibiting over one million products and some 70 000 new products were shown (Nuremberg International Toy Fair 2012 Press Information). According to Clark, the toy fair ‘is a microcosm of the industry, the only place to see it in one spot’...“anyone who is anyone in the toy industry goes” (2007, 5).

Trade shows are a very important element in the process of understanding the toy industry, keeping up with new product introductions, exposing yourself to innovative stimuli, and networking among corporate types, other inventors, vendors, and so forth (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 126).

‘Items with retail retention of four or five years are just about considered “classics”’ (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 141). Creating children’s classics that endure, and turning them into profitable franchises is the holy grail of the toy business, states the *Economist* (2002). This means that the work that goes into designing, producing, marketing and selling the products of play is a serious business, not altogether about creating ‘fun, laughter and joyfulness’. As one of my industry based interviewee’s says: “I was expecting that everyone in the business are playing, but it’s also pretty serious” (TD/bk). Sarah Monks, another industry professional agrees by writing: ‘For those who started out believing that the business was all about making toys that make the children happy, recent years have been a tough reality check. “It’s become a very different game”’ (Monks, 2011, 183). However, designers still consider fun to be central in creating new playthings, even inside the industry, as suggested by one of my interviewees:

KH: What are your personal principles for design, or do you have any?

Interviewee: To have fun. The process has to be fun and the outcome will then probably be fun, trying to create a fun. A game that creates an experience, maybe joyful that’s kind of the purpose in life, that’s my core thing to create fun, laughter, joyfulness. (TD/tg)

The ‘realities’ and ‘seriousness’ of the business of toys relates to their commercial success – their ability to break into the market and ultimately, the length of their life-cycle, both of which relate to the wow-ness of the toy. These aspects of industrial toy design are also recognized by toy designers:

A good toy is always shown by how well it sells. (TD/sp)

I always have looked at what the market trends are. As a designer I know what to make that will sell. (TD/Is)

According to data collected by the Consumer Bureau in Finland, some 10 million toys are sold every year in my native country. For purchases this equals 200 million euros per year. At Christmas time there are some 7 million toys for sale.

The toy business is very back-end, meaning that most toys are sold during the final months of the calendar year: According to the Consumer Bureau in Finland, 60% of toys are sold during the Christmas period (Kuluttajavirasto, 2009). The situation is the same across the borders – on a global scale Christmas leads the way with over 60% of toy sales, followed by toy purchases for birthdays (20%). Toys bought for ‘other occasions’ or ‘no occasion at all’ account for the remaining 20% (Brougère, 1999, 110).

In Finland, millions of toys are sold per year. Some 50% of these are purchased in department stores. Specialty shops sell 20% of all toys. Additionally, toys are bought at hyper markets, gas stations and mail order companies (Riihonen, 1991, 138).

90% of the toys sold in Finland are imported. In Finland there are some 30 000 different product items on the toy market each year, of which over a half are new every year. Only ten percent of all toys sold in Finland are produced there (Riihonen, 1991, 122). According to a coarse estimation made by the Consumer Bureau of Finland, some 80% of toys imported to Finland come from Asia (Seppänen, 2009).

In 2010 the traditional toy market continued to record positive results. Total sales amounted to approximately 491 million euros, growing 3% compared to 2009 (*Entertainment & Licensing*, Anno IX – n.1 Febbraio, 2011, 11). The total toy market finished the year up 3% in value (NPD Group, Monthly Summary December 2011). December is the most important month of the year for Toy Sales with 23% of annual toy sales in 2011 sold in this one month. (NPD Group, Monthly Summary December 2011).

In 2011, licensed toys represented 26% of total industry sales (Toy Industry Association Inc. Press release, 2012).⁴² The statistics of 2012 show that the toy sales remain a 16 billion plus industry in U.S. dollars (Cioletti, 2013).⁴³

⁴² Figures given by the NPD Group indicate that ‘toys led the way in entertainment’ by their leading position as compared to the global sales of video and DVD products and video games. According to the latest figures given by the NPD Group, the business of toys was worth 2,9 billion Sterling Pounds in January 2013 (some 3,4 billion euros) as compared to the 1,8 bn euros generated by video games and 1,9 bn euros in video and DVD sales. Source: NPD and Electronic Retail Association figures presented at the London Toy Fair in January 2013.

⁴³An industry source reports that the toy industry categories in the U.S. with the largest revenue gains in 2012 were building sets, arts and crafts, dolls and the infant/preschool segment, with respective increases of 23,8%, 6,9%, 5,8% and 2,5%. See “Toys Gain Slightly in 2012” www.licensmag.com, 60.

The important future markets are the countries with high population rates and a lot of children, such as Asia’s booming markets China and India (*Play it!* 2009, 35). Of the toy market in Europe, Russia has the biggest growth potential, followed by Poland and Hungary (The Toy Traders Association Reports, 2009).

Howard Jay Fleischer, an industry agent, says: “I have learned that a really great toy or game has no borders or language barriers. Fun always means fun!” (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 226). There are some differences, however, in the preferences in products of play, as the following quote illustrates:

Europeans have a more cerebral mind-set. They are willing to play with products that integrate strategies at all levels and educational features, whereas the U.S. markets looks for items that have sizzle and deliver instant gratification (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 224).

While toy purchases during a child’s first year are important, they rise dramatically by the fourth year (Brougère, 1999, 108). In a welfare state like Finland, children have the same possibility to acquire toys. Karimäki notes that the toy industry today is equivalent for all: this means that everyone (in Finland) has the possibility to acquire affordable toys (Karimäki; Kuluttajavirasto 2009). However, what needs to be remembered is the constant concern of the use of child labour in the countries where most of the world’s more ‘affordable’ toys are produced. Toy production is, despite networking organizations and regulations, one of the industries that are known to have problems regarding work conditions and child labour. Jukka Pääkkönen from Suomen ammattiliittojen solidaarisuuskeskus (SAKS) urges consumers in Finland to choose known brand names as they are more sensitive to consumer criticism and they thus have to pay more attention to the ethics of production (Seppänen, 2009).

The majority of toys are produced in Asia. This is referred to as the “China factor” in toy industry terms. Costs are on the rise in China, however, as Monks writes:

...some ask if toy production will continue its historical migration, this time to Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or further. Some toy production still takes place in Mexico...Canada, Eastern Europe...But: China is the place (Monks, 2011, 196-197).

Moreover, Asia is rising as a major player in the entertainment business of the world, if we consider this part of the world from two perspectives; on the first hand from the perspective of production and on the other hand, from the perspective of creating thematic substance for the toy (and entertainment) industry. As Allison notes, the

eyes of the global consumers of entertainment and toys are no longer solely on the western world. 'Imagination and entertainment constructed on 'the Japanese' plays an increasingly important role in the entertainment and toy business' (Allison, 2006).

Another important development within the industry of toys that needs to be taken into account here, concerns the relationship of the business to other areas of cultural production (i.e. the aforementioned supersystem of entertainment). As Ladensohn Stern and Schoenhaus write, the toy industry on a larger scale connects to the entertainment industry, which again links to the licensing industry. "Licensing – paying for the use of a name, an endorsement, a logo, a look, a product or a concept – is neither new nor unique for toys" (1990, 142).⁴⁴

Seiter notes that licensing has been institutionalized as a secondary industry to the toy and entertainment businesses (1995, 197, 199). Today, licensing is an industry of its own with separate trade shows, agents, and marketing specialists. In the 1990s toy manufacturers made up about 15% of the business in licensing. In 2007, Clark writes that licensed products make up to 30% of industry sales (2007, 121). In 2013 the situation remains the same.⁴⁵ Professional toy designers acknowledge these connections with other industries and they advise novice designers to look at other industries for inspiration (e.g. Miller-Winkler 2009, 19).

The toy market today, is according to Auerbach 'dynamic, transitory and stimulating' (2009, 20). The industry's desire for economic growth means that there is a constant flow of new toys entering the marketplace. Toys are in a direct competition with other lines of the leisure sector (The Toy Traders Association Reports, 2009). One example of a competing industry that has been much debated in the sector of this industry, which concentrates in the making of perhaps more 'traditional' (mostly non-technological) playthings, is the (digital) games business. I, as a designer and analyst working in the industry myself, have, however, noticed that the former, somewhat hostile attitudes towards gaming are changing at rapid speed. In practice, this means that both parties have started to see the benefits of expanding their products of play beyond historical borders. This means that *hybridization* has become a perceivable trend that breaks boundaries between what has previously been considered as two separate sectors. On that account, the age of the ludic turn as discussed in the introductory chapter has also come to mean the age of hybrid products that expand previous understandings of corporality, immateriality and the playful product experience. It is no longer uncommon to see toys

⁴⁴ For example, in *Millennial Monsters* (2006), Allison claims that there were 12 000–15 000 Hello Kitty products on the market. Seven years later the number has probably doubled.

⁴⁵ According to www.licensemag.com, licenses are typically the key driver of the toy category. Though they accounted for 30% of total industry sales in 2012, they typically command higher average retail prices. See "Toys Gain Slightly in 2012" www.licensemag.com, 60.

and games providing elements from each other and thus to provide multidimensional playing experiences (Heljakka, 2012).

According to toy industry statistics, in 2011 building sets were the fastest growing supercategory. (NPD Group, Monthly Summary December 2011). Wired Magazine has titled the MakeDo series, a series of contemporary construction sets 'The best toy ever' (MakeDo Press Release, 2012). Other significant developments for 2012 is a resurgence of toys on the higher end of the price scale as well as an influx of educational toys (Toy Industry Association Inc. Press release, 2012).

In the following section, I will move on to present the practices of toy design, from the perspectives of the industry, toy design education and at the same time give voice to some independent toy designers. Before entering this discussion, I would like to present two different ways of seeing the most important trends (noted between 2011–2012) that influence current toy design. The first example is presented by a European toy designer, the other one by the American Toy Industry Association:

Adam Shalito, toy designer specializing in children's products at company IDKID, lists five trends in contemporary toy design: 1. pimp my toy (examples: Miss luna Barbie, Ikea hacker = fun new toys), 2. homemade (etsy.com, an eBay for artists), 3. eco-friendly (Hape) but 'there is no way to make totally ecofriendly toys' or 'hippy toys', 4. ironic design (Campeggi), 5. luxury (in terms of raw material) (Shalito, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes).

Three of Six top trends according to the Toy Industry Association Inc. Press release of 2012 are: *Generation app*: there is an abundance of toys that work with smart devices and apps. Toymakers are using technology to enhance classic play patterns – not to erase them. Physical toys remain integral to the play experience; in many cases; companies have created traditional toys that interact with popular devices that are already in so many homes. *Glowing wild*: from arts and craft toys that incorporate LED components to exciting light-up toys that safely simulate fireworks (glow component). *Little learners*: Far from simple "watch me" toys, products in this category build cognitive and developmental skills beginning at a very early age, transforming little ones into well-rounded, lifelong learners. Includes: Infant to pre-school toys and games that educate and challenge, and educational toys targeted to children of all ages (Toy Industry Association Inc. Press release, 2012).

What these ideas tell us, is that the views of a designer (the 'trendsetter') can drastically differ from what is considered 'trendy' from the industry viewpoint ('toy trade analysts'). In order to work in the industry that aims at mass-volumes in toy products, requires from the toy designer an understanding of what increases the chances of the product to succeed on the market. Therefore, in the next section, I will elaborate more on the work of the toy designer mostly from an industry viewpoint.

Toy design

Many theorists have pointed out that there is no escape from the world of objects. The designer is therefore, claims Helen Rees, on centre stage in consumer society (Rees, 1997, 120). According to Monö (1997), a product can be seen from different perspectives, namely implement (having to do with practical function), product (designed to be attractive in a way that makes the object profitable in production), merchandise (designed to be marketable), ornament (for decorative purposes), or a collector's item (the antiquarian point of view having to do with the historical meanings of the object, its value for the collector, its availability and place in mass-production).

Thus to *implement* means the practical point of view, *product* the industrial point of view, *merchandise* the commercial point of view, *ornament* the artistic point of view and finally, *collector's item* the antiquarian point of view (Monö, 1997, 17–18). Defining the contemporary toy in the light of this categorization would place it in more than one of the perspectives as mentioned by Monö. To see mass-marketed toys as products used in play and as commercial merchandise is self-evident, but to see them as ornaments and collector's items requires a deeper reflection. This part of the chapter will address the toy from the viewpoint of the designer working in the context of the toy industry, and aiming at the creation of a novel toy product with *play value*. Concerning the perspectives of 'ornament' and 'collector's item', in other words the possibilities to look at the contemporary toy in terms of its aesthetics and longevity, I will address these qualities in more detail in the coming chapters.

The toy industry is linked with both fashion and entertainment industries, as its product portfolio changes constantly. Therefore the design of toys is directed both by the innovative and playful creativity of the toy designer as well as global and cultural phenomena.

Toys are the first consumer goods given to children. Still, children rarely know where their toys and media come from, notes Seiter (2007, 98). One might add to this that seldom does the parent or the gift-giver know either, as a (mass-marketed) plaything often is a product with an anonymous source (Laukka, 2004, 392). The playmakers, as Tim Walsh, the author of *Timeless Toys* (2005), points out, are mostly unknown to the general public (Walsh, 2005, viii). Furthermore, it has been said that the design of toys is often realized without children being involved (Richir & Taravel, 1999, 379). This is not completely true in today's situation, as toys are often tested with their primary target group by both toy design students and toy companies. Sometimes, the creativity of children is also employed by toy companies in designing new playthings: As a new trend accentuates, sometimes toys are even designed by the child as well.



The Otis School of Design is based in Los Angeles, 2009.

These “Kid-preneurs”, writes Rice, mean that ‘toys and games are increasingly being invented by kids, for kids and manufacturers and educators are promoting entrepreneurial spirits through programs, competitions and experiments that put youngsters at the helm of creativity and innovation’ (Rice, 2011).

Mass-marketed toys are mainly designed in the U.S.A., Japan and the European countries. As Sheenan and Andrews note, the ‘toy business is highly focused on the whole ‘Winterval’ seasonal gift-giving process’ but their product development activity never rests (2009, 94). Most mass-produced toys are designed by toy designers or idea agencies, either independently or employed by the toy companies. As Rassi notes and as we come to see toys as artefacts used in play in the course of this book, the designer, producer and user all have their own opinions about the toy (Rassi, 2012). But what one toy design educator says is that “we [the designers] can still design suggestions!” ‘A toy is in the mind of the child, a toy product is in the mind of the designer. Ideally, a toy product is the same in the mind of both parties’, say Kudrowitz and Wallace (2008).

Most toys emerge from group efforts, e.g. from the work of a product development department or team where designers, artists, engineers, marketers, even the people at a toy company’s advertising agency contribute their ideas along the way (Ladensohn Stern and Schoenhaus 1990, 32). Technical, social and aesthetic knowledge go into both the production and the use of a commodity (Appadurai, 1986, 41). Product designers concern themselves with the structure and appearance of industrial products. Industrial engineers design the mechanisms and layouts of production processes. Sometimes the designer makes the final product but more often, [s]he makes a representation – a plan, a program, or image – of an artefact to be constructed by others, notes Schön (1983, 77–78).

As a designer, you're different from an inventor (TD/dk). A toy designer needs to invent, but what is known to the industry as a 'toy inventor' does not necessarily have the skills of a designer. What a toy inventor does, is to come up with an idea, sometimes even on a rather abstract level. Anyone can invent a toy but it is the toy designer who will eventually participate in the process of developing the idea into a proper toy product.⁴⁶ In his book *Serious Play*, Michael Schrage writes about how contemporary design culture addresses the importance of experience at the early stages of design. In fact, what he proposes is that even a prototype should be an invitation to play (Schrage, 2000, 208).

We [in the toy business] develop and invent, take things through to production. Inventing, engineering, but you also have to understand marketing. (TD/sp)

The toy design task is most of all a process in which many professionals take part and in which many paths of professional knowledge come together. The toy designing experience is something that e.g. according to the toy development division at Disney Consumer Products, requires knowledge of child psychology and play patterns. At Disney the finished prototype for a toy idea is e.g. a comic book-like story board which can later act as an instant creative brief for the design team (Damian, 2009).

So if we look at X's design I think in process we start with inspiration, to be inspired, use your insights, watching kids in context and then moving on to ideation, using those insights to brainstorm and then implementation of so you end up doing it quickly, so you learn and go back and do it again before you go back and finish the toy. (TD/bb)

In this sense, to participate in a toy design project seems a lot like engaging in play. An idea for a toy can stem from anything, but it needs much more than an excellent idea for a toy that makes a great toy product. It is here that the play of designers must develop into thinking in the terms of the business. The creative people, educators of toy design, students, and designers should be committed to and involved in the process of facilitating play. 'You also need to fully understand the value and balance of traditions, changing trends, the shifting marketplace, safety standards, and other global influences that impinge on the stability and styles in the world of toys', reminds Auerbach (2009, 6).

⁴⁶ Walsh (2005) sees the inventor as the person who is most responsible for the creation of the toy. A 'developer' on the other hand, is the person responsible for the improvement and/or popularization of the toy (idea). For ease of reference, further on in this thesis I will use the term 'toy designer' when referring both to individual designers and toy companies, both of which are responsible for bringing the 'wow' into the toy-to-be.

KH: What do you do as a designer (job description)?

Interviewee: Trying to find a gap; either a new twist on an old idea or trying to find the next new thing that no one has seen [yet]. (TD/ss)

Often, as we have seen, mass-production and industrially produced toys are a result of teamwork involving many kinds of talent. Toy designers need to be creative, artistic and determined. Many toy designers have a bachelor's degree in either toy design or industrial design (Torpey, 2008, 7). Martin Caveza, founding chair of the Otis school of Design in Los Angeles says about the work of a toy designer: 'You've got to be a designer, an engineer, and a marketing person' (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 117). The processes of toy design are generally not transparent to the everyday player. Therefore, we need to turn to the toy design programmes at design schools and toy designers themselves in order to find out more about the profession. There are different parts to design work, including processes that address the aesthetic, ergonomic, versus the emotional (TD/dk). Toy design programmes offer education, for example in the fields of visual and mechanical design.

The Fashion Institute of Technology (the world's first and foremost accredited bachelor's degree program in Toy Design) offers an education for toy designers that includes studies in child development and psychology, design and engineering of hard and soft toys, game design, model making, product materials, and safety considerations. The students create three-dimensional renderings using industry-standard computer applications and are provided with an understanding of the business of toys, from manufacturing to branding and promotion (FIT website).

The toy design lectures at the toy design course at TU Delft cover the following topics: Physical, cognitive, and social-emotional child development; children's interests and preferences; creativity techniques and designing with children (Gielen, 2008).

Toy Product Design, Mechanical Engineering course 2.00b is a hands-on, project based introductory course in product design targeted at freshmen at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In this course, students work in small teams of 5–6 members to design and prototype new toys. They are introduced to design tools and techniques as well as the product development process. Throughout the course, the students develop their own ideas from a sketch to a working prototype (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008, 10).

As Wuytens and Williems note, ‘some designers may be more positioned towards the industrial end and others more towards the artistic end’ (2010, 1). As we have seen here, toy design as a profession requires an understanding of many areas of design, as for example, the design work of soft toys and dolls differs from the designing so-called hard toys. As the course description at FIT demonstrates, the designing of soft toys and dolls requires research and development, concept creation, sketching, and pattern-making, prototyping, construction and presentation skills. The study of materials, manufacturing techniques, packaging, and industry requirements, as related to toy design, are also included in the coursework (FIT website). Design work related to hard toys, on the other hand, requires specific skills in engineering.

In the 1960s, Leslie Daiken writes in her book *Children’s Toys throughout the Ages* that a for a designer, ‘toys present an exercise in producing something which will be constructionally sound, easy to make, pleasant to feel and look at, and economical in price. In these considerations [s/]he is governed both by the manufacturer and the customer’ (1963, 14). How the toy design education caters for these needs is by teaching the students how to put the ideation process into motion, how to build prototypes and how to test them:

We follow this general design process. In the class we first choose themes, we choose a few to look into. Within that we do some idea generation. We make sketch models. Will it work, will it play. Will it be playful for an audience. We cut that in half and do a mock-up of these few ideas. More play testing, we bring the ideas to toy companies and we may continue with a few models into the prototype stage. We teach this method, I don’t use that myself. I’m not thinking about it. I’ll make some sketches, I go through a relaxed version on my own. We teach what they should be doing in the industry. (TD/bk)

18 years ago, I was a designer and a model maker and the process involved making handmade prototypes. Now we use 3D designing in prototyping. (TD/sp)

Inspiration is sought from the current situation, the market, by looking at trends from both inside and outside of the toy industry (TD/sp; TD/ss) and by studying companies in the industry in order to try and identify the areas where there might be opportunities. This process achieves maybe 50% of the ideas, as one of the toy designers interviewed notes: ‘The other part just comes to appear through spark of inspiration that can happen in the bath’ (TD/sp).



The Fashion Institute of Technology of the State University of New York developed the first Bachelor of Fine Arts program in Toy Design in the United States and Europe.

Toy designers help to create toys and toy packaging. Adam Shalito, toy designer, sees toys ‘as little orphans, their package has to explain them’ (Shalito, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author’s notes). The designing of toy packaging is almost as important as the design work behind the toy itself. It is the packaging that attracts the player to a new toy. It is also on the packaging that the toy designer or the toy company has the possibility to communicate information about the designer, the toy company and of course the back story of the toy.

Clark claims that the toy industry is fixated on secrecy (2007, 19). Most mass-marketed toys’ designers are unknown, as the persona of the designer of a particular toy is irrelevant for the consumers according to many bigger toy companies. Toys that have taken the market by storm such as the Cabbage Patch Kids (Xavier Roberts) in the 1980s or the Bratz dolls (Carter Bryant) in this century have since become legendary characters inside the toy industry.

Toy packaging seldom, if ever, reveals the inventors or designer(s) behind a toy. Toys that have become classics and lived for many decennia, may eventually make their inventors and designers known. But as most of the toys enter the market, the general public does not get to ‘look behind the curtains’ and to understand who has contributed in a toy’s design. Often, toy design is the result of team work, not unlike i.e. the design of board games or digital games. Still, more often, the inventors and designers of many games are more known to the public than is the case with of toys.

One notable trend seems to be how garage size companies are building up their business towards mass-markets. Players of the 1980s want to take their own toy stories to the industrial playground as toy designers of the 21st century. This sometimes means that the delicate design philosophy is somewhat shaped into more practical dimensions. Many of the toys displayed at toy fair without packaging as specialty stores are able to sell them with just a label attached. On the contrary, to get access to the mass-market in the U.S.A., the toy will in most cases need packaging. This, on the other hand, allows a wider presentation of the back story connected to the toy (Heljakka, 2011).

For toy design students, there is a clear lack of handbooks on toy design. Before entering a toy design education programme, the student may not know toy designers, toy design work or the toy industry at all, besides personal toy play experiences with singular toy objects that may only carry a brand name.

A field trip to some of the toy design programmes and courses (Hong Kong, Delft, New York, Los Angeles) in the world reveal a need for accurate literature in the field of toy design. There clearly is a wide knowledge base among toy design educationalists but for the most part, this seems to be embedded in tacit knowing (and has not found its way to educational material such as text books, at least not ones publicly available). In other words, there is a need to understand what should be taken into consideration when designing good toys, how play value may be conceptually understood and what kind of elements may build up the wow in a toy. Equally, there is a need to understand the consumption side more deeply, i.e. how the consumer, user or player ultimately uses the toy. By familiarizing oneself with these matters, the designers could improve their understanding of how to create a wider range of possibilities for play for the users. For my part, in the following, I will discuss the task of the toy designer more thoroughly in reference to affordances, play value and understandings of what makes a *good* toy.

Affording play potential

Instead of thinking about toys as material objects, Ruckenstein proposes that they could be thought of in terms of their *potentiality* (2011, 12). From the beginnings of this study I have had similar ideas about the creation of playful potential in toys as a task of the toy designers. It seems that the *theory of affordances* provides a useful concept in contemplating the relationships that the player has with toys. Thus, in the following, I will explore the meanings of affordance as traditionally understood in design theory. Furthermore, I will explain how the notion of affordance offers a way of inspecting the toy as an artefact that affords different ways of playing, or play patterns. Let us start by exploring what is meant with an affordance.

‘With products that require less knowledge for their operation, learning usually occurs by following cues within the interface. These are known in the psychological literature as “affordances”’ (Margolin, 2002, 48). An *affordance* is hence a quality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action. This term was introduced by psychologist James J. Gibson in his 1977 article *The Theory of Affordances*. Gibson’s theory on affordances describes how we perceive an objects’ potential uses, for instance how seeing a chair affords sitting. A chair is meant for sitting and the invitation to do so must be embedded in its design.

In 1988 Donald Norman appropriated the term affordances in the context of human–machine interaction to refer to just those action possibilities that are readily perceivable by an actor. Designers often use *afford* as meaning “to suggest” or “to invite”. Affordances, notes Kyttä, ‘can also be other than the so-called “right” uses of objects, in fact, each object has countless affordances’ (2003, 48).

The concept of affordances is an interesting notion, when considering toy design. A toy, should according to common sense *afford play*. But as seen before, play as a complex phenomenon may be too big a solution space to grasp for designers as such. There is not only one way of ‘playing right’, if any. The appropriation of a toy object means that the player is the master, the toy the subordinate which is open for manipulation by its player. Therefore, the idea of affordances needs to be developed into a more practical tool, when designing artefacts for playful interaction. Considering the theory of affordances is more useful, if we think of the play scenarios embedded in the toy by the toy designer as *suggestions*, as presented by Kudrowitz and Wallace (2008).

In order for a mass-produced toy to have affordances, it must be thought of from a design perspective. Artefacts acquire meaning through i.e. visceral, material and narrative qualities. A toy, just like any cultural product, will then be attached with different meanings (by designers), and be a source of meaning (for the players). Toys are designed with a particular emphasis on the visual and tactile, where the aesthetics, functions and features all come together in a meaningful way. Toys should be regarded as open systems. F. Herrigel wrote that “toys should be as simple as possible, or as changeable as possible, so that a child’s fantasy is not limited”.⁴⁷ In other words, toy designers should be able to give suggestions for play as presented by Kudrowitz and Wallace, but not try to limit the possibilities of play in the toy.

⁴⁷ See F. Herrigel (1906) “Die pädagogische Bedeutung des Spiels,” *Neue Blätter aus Süddeutschland für Erziehung und Unterricht*, 216 in Retter, Spielzeug, 139, cited in Ganaway, 2008, 377.

KH: Do you consciously use the assumed experience of the toy user as a design principle? How?

Interviewee: Sutton-Smith [says]: you can't assume this. But we say that you have to design something. We suggest play, we have to have a starting point with the mindset that children are going to do different things with it. (TD/bk)

On a general level, design can be seen from three dimensions, namely the visceral, behavioral and the reflective (Norman, 2004, 5). The visceral aspect of design is concerned with appearances, the behavioral design has to do with the pleasure and effectiveness of use. Finally, reflective design considers the rationalization and intellectualization of a product. 'These different dimensions are interwoven through any design', says Norman. The most important aspect of Norman's concept, in thinking about the design and marketing of toys is the visceral aspect, because 'at the visceral level, physical features – look, feel and sound – dominate' (Norman, 2004, 67). The behavioural part of design in a toy relates to its manipulation and therefore dictates how pleasurable playing with the toy is. This aspect deals with how the player will use the toy in play. The reflective design may in the realm of toys point to the values a player projects onto the toy. This aspect, in reference to toys is probably the hardest for the designer to control. However, as I believe, it is possible to strengthen this last aspect by ensuring that the visceral and behavioural characteristics of the toy are grounded in thorough design thinking.

The most important thing in toy design, according to the Toy Museum Hevosenkenkä in Finland, is that it supports the child in each phase of his/her development (Rassi, 2012). This is a very traditional and perhaps a little conservative way of looking at toy culture of today, since it only addresses the toy as a tool for learning (and as a product targeted at children). As Brougère points out, toy is not only to be seen as a tool, but also as an instrument of dreams, wishes and the imagination (Brougère, 1992, 50). Here we can see how the first value appointed to the toy concerns its behavioural quality and the second the reflective quality as pointed out by Norman. It is interesting to note that neither of the comments directly link with the visceral aspect, although it plays a crucial part in attracting the player towards the toy. Then again, to ensure that a plaything has aesthetic value, is probably the easiest part of toy design. It becomes more challenging when trying to figure out possible play patterns for the toy. The *wow element* is thus much more than a visceral quality of a toy.

What is needed in practical terms, is an idea for the *activity* or *pattern of play* that the toy designer would like to aim at. Mathieu Gielen, a toy design educator says that the central thought of the toy design course (at Delft University of Technology) is that 'toys are tools for play' and that if you want to design a toy, you start by designing an *activity*.

The toy is then derived from the activity (Gielen, 2008, accentuation mine). Naturally, the nature of the activity depends on the type of toy being designed.

User as player: Actualizing play potential

Products facilitate experiences. We are all consumers of experience, says Steeves (2000, 164). Hekkert and Schifferstein define the subjective product experience 'as the awareness of the psychological effects elicited by the interaction with a product'. The experience includes sensory stimulation, meanings and values attached to the product and the feelings and emotions that are elicited (2007, 1). 'Both the physical properties of a thing and the values given to the thing affect the formation of meaning' (Vihma, 1995, 28). Objects are a means of mediated communication and all three-dimensional objects are active instruments of communication, and in particular of non-verbal communication (Volonté, 2010, 118). What they communicate visually, may not be all, however. Playthings especially, attain value in the course of their physical manipulation.⁴⁸

Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users. Man is not only homo faber, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981,1).

Toy design, just like any area of design requires an understanding of the experience that it aims to create in the user. Most of us relate toys and play with them with the experience of fun. 'Toys should evoke fun and pleasure by being beautiful to use and to look at. Beauty, fun and pleasure all work together to produce enjoyment, a state of positive affect', says Norman (2004, 103). Understanding user experience and the beauty of use Norman points at again, requires research. Research is seen as one part of user-inspired design, say Koskinen et al (2003, 62).

⁴⁸ Anthropologist Helena Brembeck brings forward an interesting view of the user/player of a toy as a co-agent: Using the term of Mike Michaels, writes Brembeck, 'one can conceive of the child and the toy as an occasional "co(a)gent," a hybrid of a human and nonhuman, a child-toy, momentarily acting as a unified entity. Artefacts "quietly and tacitly evoke suggestions and embody indistinct possibilities," Michaels argues, at the same time as individuals deploy various sorts of discourses trying to figure out a specific kind of use' (Brembeck, 2008, 170). When engaging with a toy one could also see the toy playing adult as the other half of a co-agent, as described by Brembeck. In this way, a toy could also be seen as an extension of oneself. For further discussion on 'extensions' see e.g. Lee, 2001.

Most designers talk about the user, but what or who is the user? In the thinking of design theorist Klaus Krippendorff, there is no such thing as the user, there maybe is an average quality, but there are many different kinds of users, a medium. But a designer cannot design for an average subject, it has to look at distribution of different kinds of users. Users are one kind of stakeholder; a subject that is knowledgeable, interested and involved. Designers must enrol these stakeholders into their project (Krippendorff, 2010). In terms of toys, a designer needs to understand the play that happens with them in order to understand what is considered to be valuable in toy play.

KH: What kind of experiences are toys related with; material, emotional, other?
Interviewee: Well, I think toys are related definitely to all of those as I would see them. Tactile, I think. Nostalgic, it should be emotional and another word in there, I think it's like a stimulating, a new story. (TD/dk)

Products should elicit the user to engage with them through their physicality. Fun can result from engagement, but is not a goal as such. 'Design is not about the smile on the product, it is about the smile in the user's heart' (Overbeeke et al, 2003, 9). In this study, it becomes necessary to refer to the user not only as an adult that uses toys, but also a player. Play does not exist without its players, reminds Unt: 'The player belongs essentially to the structure of play' (2012, 152). Toys as objects may exist as artefacts, but toy play cannot be addressed without considering the player. In this part of the thesis, I will acknowledge the user of toys as a player and throughout the rest of the thesis refer to the adult users of toys as *players*. Berg et al (1996) have written about the manifold roles of toy players. In their view the players may be seen as imaginers, learners and as socializing subjects. Additionally, players can be discussed by gender, by aggression or as friends and members of play culture and finally, as narrators (1996, 6). In today's world the roles of the toy players are probably even more varied, depending on the toys they are engaging with.

KH: What kind of toy makes an experience?
Interviewee: A tool that brings the meaning of play with it for the child [...]. Something with which a child may reach an imaginative [state of mind], a will to plunge into [play], to be creative in her own way. [Something that] awakens the excitement. (TR/rl)

In order to see if the suggested toy ideas work in practice, the designer should be present when the toy is tested. In the realm of toy design, observation thus seems the most suitable method to ensure how the toy comes 'alive' in play:

The one guy sort of said a principle, [he said] "Watch the kid, not the toy", so if you want to, whatever we are designing something they sort of think what would it look like when a child is playing with it and the person playing with it is an adult, if you're interested in. Because it always succeeds in, I mean, almost 100% when a toy has a new and original way that makes a person move while they're playing with it. (TD/dk)

Play-value and good toys

I started doing very small toys, you know touch-key, very cheap novelty and I was very interested in it because I had to work designing toys with all the magic you know and the play value, the play pattern, the play depth that's needed to design toys. (TD/rl)

One of the questions that drives myself as a researcher of toys and toy play is the one of value. Objects are associated with different values, notes Niinimäki. 'Extrinsic values are refer to the utilitarian aspect of objects while intrinsic value is linked to the experience of pleasure during consumption' (Niinimäki, 2011, 52, orig. Jacobs, D. (2007) *Adding Values. The Cultural Side of Innovation*, ArtEZ Press, Arnhem). In my opinion, both of these values link closely with toys. The presumption is that toy play in itself has extrinsic value (*can it be played with?*), but a toy must also have so-called intrinsic play value in itself (*how can it be played with?*) in order to be considered a worthy plaything.⁴⁹ Play value is mostly associated with fun, but the toyish qualities of an artefact communicate different dimensions of its ability to serve the player in a playful way beyond 'the fun part'. Every designer will have his/her opinion about what will contribute to a toy experience, but it is extremely difficult to design specific forms of experience, such as fun into a product. Consequently, we have to analyze more carefully, what constitutes the different *values* that make a toy a fun (and otherwise an) important artefact to be used in play.

Every toy proposes its own action. Being able to classify types of play may also help a designer in determining whether a potential toy product has play value, Kudrowitz and

⁴⁹ According to earlier studies, children with access to a variety of toys were found to reach higher levels of intellectual achievement, regardless of children's gender, race, or social class. See Bradley, R.H. (1985) "Play materials and intellectual development" in C.C. Brown and A.W. Gottfried (Eds.) *Play Interactions*. Johnson and Johnson, Skillman, N.J. and Elardo, R., Bradley, R., and Caldwell, B.M. (1975) "The relations of infant's home environments to mental test performance from 6 to 36 months: A longitudinal analysis". *Child Development*, 46, 71–76.

Wallace suggest (2008, 1). As we have seen, one does not need a toy in order to play: Kudrowitz and Wallace note further that children (and adults) can find play value in things that are not toy products (something that they call *transformed toys*, 2008, 1). A newsletter from TIE (Toy Industries of Europe) states: The term ‘use in play’, is not the same as ‘attractive to play with’. Children may be attracted to play with car keys but it does not mean that car keys are a toy. Instead, the document states that you must consider whether the manufacturer has *deliberately added a play value* (TIE Newsletter, 21st of November 2011, accentuation mine).

As we have seen, according to some definitions toys are at many times considered as ‘insignificant’ or without value. If we, on the other hand, and in the scope of this thesis want to see the contemporary as an artefact that connotes value, we must then ask what this value consists of.

Therefore, in the following, we will take a closer look at what has been said about play value of toys, one of the most significant topics of discussion when considering the attitudes towards toys and the play that happens with them – the toy experiences of players.

When considering previous writings on toys, play value is a much employed concept. In an industry article, one can find the statement that toys are still important and that consumers are willing to pay extra for products that deliver play value.⁵⁰ But of what kind of elements is play value built?

In the following, I will consider the concept of play value from the perspective of toy design, play professionals and the industry. Let us begin the discussion by exploring what has been said about the ‘goodness’ of toys.

I am an inventor, the first part of the process is to have an idea from inspiration. Difficult to define where that comes from. Design and development is a process of understanding all the factors of what makes a product successful: good play value, something that is unique, something that is going to be the right cost, finally to meet all of the safety and quality standards which are required. (TD/sp)

Nelson and Nilsson note that whenever the effects of toys are discussed, the topics shift between what is good and what is less good about them (2002, 21). According to Marjatta Kalliala, who has studied the change of play in Finnish culture, toys may help the child to start the play act, but playing in itself is not a straightforward phenomenon that could only be explained through toys. This is why there really cannot be a simplified discussion about good or bad toys (Laatikainen, 2011, 72).

⁵⁰ See “Toys Gain Slightly in 2012” www.licensemag.com, 60.

What is good then, is largely a matter for the toy designing adult to decide: If a product is attractive to an adult, makes him smile, is amusing and satisfying him, it will be liked by children as well, claims Cassotti (2005). Ideas about the player (and his/her age) will in some cases, however, limit the solution space of designers.

A good toy activates the child to function and participate in play and to develop him/herself according to his/her own developmental age. According to child psychologists, writes Chudacoff, young children below the age of six, need more structured, realistic toys to assist pretend play, while youngsters more easily transform ordinary objects into playthings (2007, 8). Toys designed for older children accentuate the use of the imagination and the freedom of play. A good toy gives the child space for play (Lehtonen, 2011). Good toy design, again, may result in both play with the artefact and a sustainable toy (Rassi, 2012).

Eeva Riihonen, the author of the book *Lapsi ja lelu* [The Child and The Toy] claims, that a good toy is one that a child needs to come up functions by him/herself. She gives an example: A puppet e.g. is better than a doll that is pre-programmed to laugh and cry (Keskinen, 2006). According to Aula, versatile, modifiable and easily displayable toys work the best (Aula, Maria-Kaisa; Kuluttajavirasto, 2009). Consequently, what is important to consider when discussing toys is to decide whether the toy is goal-directed (in that it proposes ‘correct actions’ as noted by Chudacoff (2007, 212) or open-ended. According to the Child Welfare Organization in Finland a toy should be evaluated according to its functionality, safety, artistry and economics and comprehensibility. In terms of artistry, the toy should be original, stylish and modifiable. Good functionality is characterized by versatility, instructiveness and comprehensibility (Keskinen, 2006). A good toy, according to Berg (1996, 140–141) should be standardized, universal, uniform, objectivated and include a moment of surprise.

KH: What should designers take into consideration when designing new toys?

DrT: Certainly they have to consider the age that the toy is developed for, what materials make sense, what is going to be easy to clean for a child under just three, and safe, a product that will have some durability.

According to Stevanne Auerbach, a.k.a. ‘Dr.Toy’, an expert in in child development, psychology, education and special education, toy designers should pay attention to the following when designing a toy: Safety, Fun, Age Grading (age appropriateness), Design (usability, aesthetics, sensory stimulation), Versatility (more than one way of using), Durability, Interesting (is it enticing), Creativity (will it expand the imagination), Usability (does it allow exploration), Packaging (does it match the product), Personal

Values (does it promote positive values such as nurturing childhood), Educational (what is the educational value of the toy), Maintenance (can it be cleaned/reused), Cost (is it affordable/does the price match the play value) (Auerbach, 2004).

In her article about making toys for a global market, Kathleen Alfano claims that a good toy is basically a good toy around the world because of the universality of basic play patterns (Alfano, 1996, 23).⁵¹

As a rule of thumb, educators seem to prefer toys that offer wide possibilities to open-ended play. Kalliala speaks of so-called *precise toys*. Toys of this kind mean playthings that are thoroughly produced (for pre-programmed play) and therefore closed in terms of their playing patterns. These toys lead, according to Kalliala, only to 'reduced' toy play (Laatikainen, 2011, 72). Sometimes a toy can well be too structured, as Unt notes in her comment on historical doll houses:

Popular 19th century doll-houses and porcelain dolls are criticised for their lack of play qualities. Not only are they fragile and not suited for active physical play, but also permit only a certain kind of play (Unt, 2012, 181).

Generally, the toys that are examined in closer detail in this study – dolls, soft toys and action figures have been seen to afford this possibility, with perhaps the exception of license-themed toy characters that are sometimes thought to limit play patterns because of the themes and narratives incorporated in the toys.⁵² This is why all sorts of building blocks have been particularly well appreciated by educationalists throughout their history. Neutrality in the toy regarding utilizing a certain theme or targeting to a specific gender seems to be a topic that continues to intrigue toy designers and companies. In an age where the 'pink and blue/silver/black ghettos' seem to dominate the retail sector in toys, every plaything that does not address gender per se, is a breath of fresh air.⁵³

In the thinking of Sato Hisao, toy designer at lifestyle company Muji, the design of a toy must be: 1. simple and clear, 2. attractive and 3. have good quality (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes).

⁵¹ Surely, most classical toys as, for example, the ball, the hula-hoop or the yo-yo have universal play patterns. However, I wonder whether or not the types of toys this thesis employs – dolls, action figures and soft toys - are (only) used according to universal playing patterns.

⁵² The industry view on this is however rather different, e.g. according to Nancy Zwiers from a toy brand building and invention company, 'play value can increase exponentially if you buy toys that are part of a collectible world or product' (Zwiers, 2012).

⁵³ Toy types such as traditional, animal-themed soft toys and toy characters that lean on the fantastic in their aesthetics, seem to cater best for this request for neutrality.

These guidelines are useful, but they need to be explored further by, for example, asking what the good quality Hisao points to, means in a toy. Quality in a toy usually refers to sturdiness, but also to its safety in use. These points will be discussed next.

As seen, one of the initial steps in designing toys is to determine their target group and therefore age appropriateness; whom the toy is designed for. Besides age appropriateness, the question of safety needs to be addressed. The toy industry is regulated by strict rules and directives especially concerned with matters regarding the safety in use of the toy. Safety is one of the most addressed topics when designing toys for children.

Possibly the biggest single challenge for the industry in recent years has been the introduction in its major markets of even more stringent toy safety standards, backed by mandatory regulations concerning toy design, labelling and permissible levels of potentially harmful substances, such as phthalate (Monks, 2011, 180-181).

Besides phthalates, lead paint and magnetics have been, during the past years in the business listed as potential safety hazards in the industry (Oppenheimer, 2009). The choking hazard caused by small pieces such as magnets is not something that a designer first and foremost thinks of when aiming at a 'toy experience'. When considering the design work in the area of toys, issues regarding safety must seem rather un-glamorous for any aspiring toy designer. However, as long as a toy is perceived as a plaything that may get in the hands of an infant, any potential hazard should be 'designed out of the product.'

In a way, this is often about going to great lengths, as in most cases the toy comes with a label communicating its target group. Nevertheless, everyone that works in an industry that designs for play has to always consider the possibility for the toy to break and turn into something of potential danger in the hands of an unintended consumer.

When I had a summer job at a toy store during the first years of my university education, I often noticed how the customers were asking for a toy that would fit a certain age category. Surprisingly, after finding them a toy or two to choose from, most of them then chose something that would in fact suit a player that was a little older. Usually they said that the child is smarter than its peers.

Besides safety issues (related to materials, loose parts) producers of playthings have to consider possible returns of toys, their recycling and mental safety. It is often the task of adults to be responsible for the condition of the toys and their age appropriateness, when considering the toy play of children (Kuluttajavirasto, 2009).⁵⁴

Ecological aspects have been brought forward as more important perspectives in toy design from the 1980s onwards. Toy producers are required to consider the environment in every stage of production. Again, consumers are expected to recycle the toy (Rassi, 2012). Questions regarding the lifecycle of toys concern both the designer and the player. I will return to the time-related qualities of contemporary toys as defined from the perspective of the toy players in Chapter 8.

When the questions regarding safety and ecology have been tackled with, it is time to move on to questions regarding the actual play value of the toy. Most toy objects may not be materially valuable per se: The rule of thumb is that toys are sold at four to five times what they cost to produce (Clark, 2007, 42). Instead, it is the meanings given to these objects that increase their value.

As has been presented here, designing toys is taking into account several aspects. A toy may be seen as a tool, but it is not only a tool – it has more than utilitarian values for the player. It should ‘not teach, yet it should help you to learn’, as Alan Brien writes, continuing:

A toy is not necessarily art, yet it is something more than a tool. It imitates and represents the real world but it must be susceptible of being explored, challenged, neglected, bullied, even destroyed, without danger. It is a substitute for which there is no substitute, it exists for its own sake and yet it should be somehow unfinished. It shouldn't be designed to teach, yet it should help you to learn (Alan Brien, "London: Old Theater Myth, New Toys," *New York Times*, January 12, 1970, 22 cited in Fox & Landshoff, 1973, 55).

The toys parents provide – or do not provide – send children a message about what is valued, say Danette and Romano (2003, 911). Kline writes of play value as ‘a measure of the product's appeal as defined by the duration and intensity with a tested child plays

⁵⁴ Examples of hazardous playthings evaluated in Finland in 2009 were toys that included phthalates, choking hazard due to strings and ropes, suction cups or loose parts, too strong a beam in a laser sword.

with a new toy’.⁵⁵ At the same time, Kline criticizes the concept, as play value actually seems to him like a tautological concept, as the most useful measure of play values have to do with a toy's success in the market, its attractiveness (based on whether children voluntarily choose it in tests), and the length of time children would play with it in free play (fascination) (Kline, 1995, 175). Kudrowitz and Wallace offer another suggestion to view what could be seen with play value of a toy:

When referring to toys, the term play value could be the likeliness that a toy will be played with by the user. Play value could also be used to describe a measure of the benefit of the play. Play value could also refer to the amount, variety, or length of play (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008, 1).

KH: What do you take into consideration when you start to design a toy?

Interviewee: What else is out there [in the category of toys] is important. Will the retailer give this space. Can we make it better and cheaper. Does it have a unique feature. Is it fun? (TD/ss)

To design toys is a multifaceted task that will take the designer beyond the concept of fun. However, Shalito points out the importance of being playful (and meanwhile, having fun). He suggests that it is important to play with kids and play yourself when designing (Shalito, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes).

Maybe, all in all, this is what designing mostly requires from the toy designer, to play a lot, and in that way, to understand the user more holistically. And as shown by one of my interviewees – this is something that cannot be learned from a text book. For contemporary toy designers, it seems to be important to dedicate time and space for play: ‘So it's spending a lot of time with lot's of kids of different ages to get a better sense of what is interesting, what is inspiring’ (TD/bb).

We do play testing at the class. People are different than you expected. You can't get this in a text book. It's really important to meet with the audience and let them try out a lot. (TD/bk)

⁵⁵ See Chudacoff, 2007, 193, orig. in Kline (1993), *Out of the Garden*, 184–186 and Juliet Schor (2004), *Born to Buy; The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*.



Girls braiding the manes of hobby horses at The Helsinki Book Fair 2011.

It is easy to agree with Torpey, who says that it ‘takes more than a love of play to excel in the toy industry’ (2008, 12), but understanding the phenomenon of play, and essentially, what toy experiences mean to players, helps to advance on the way in creating toys with qualities that exceed the limits of basic notions such as fun. For fun is a wicked concept as Huizinga shows: ‘...the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation’ (1992, 3). Blythe and Hassenzahl argue that (2003, 93) ‘fun is something we buy, something we consume, something that ultimately reproduces the situations of alienated labour that we are seeking to escape.’ In other words, fun is first something of a luxury, most often a commodity that we are seeking during our leisure time.

I design things that are humorous. I want to work with jokes in the form of objects. ...a high giggle factor. (TD/bb)

Obviously, humor plays a big part in the design of contemporary playthings. The study of Cila and Erbug (2008) showed that fun objects are associated with pleasant memories, reminding people of past events and experiences.



As argued in the thesis, the experience of fun and the meanings of a face are central in the experiences related to toys even at adult age. This ‘face’ was presented hanging from the ceiling at the Licensing Show, Las Vegas, 2012.

Poster for the art exhibition of Japanese (toy) designer Sato Hisao as seen in Tel Aviv, Israel during the From Rags to Apps Conference in 2011.

According to Unt, play value lies in the possibility of performing certain functions in play (2012, 182). Considering object-relations with toys, we may say that the utilitarian aspect refers to play value as defined by the designer. The intrinsic value deals with the actual experience of play. ‘Every child who plays also experiences something in the process’ (del Vecchio, 2003, 256). I am sure that this applies to the toy playing adult as well.

According to Sato Hisao, toys as a result of design work conducted by the toy designer bring happiness to other playful people (Hisao, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author’s notes). Thus, Hisao sees toys as tools for happiness and comes to attach the value of happiness into toys as a category of products. del Vecchio has made an exhaustive list about the needs that adults have when considering whether to purchase toys for their child. He writes:

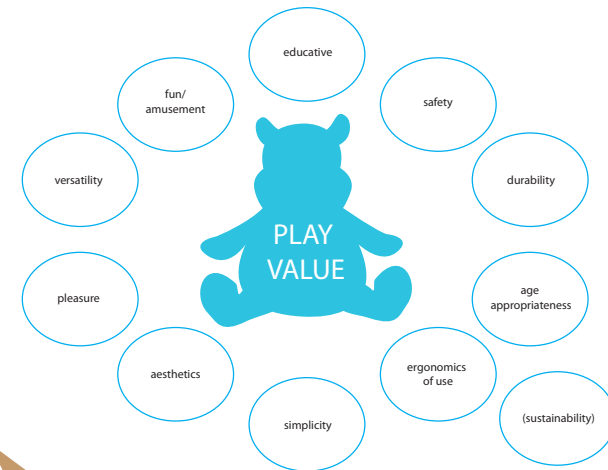
Toys that can best fulfill one or more of a parent’s desires tend to achieve blockbuster status. These needs include the following: Child’s Happiness, Child’s Continued Enjoyment (play value), Child’s Creativity, Child’s Safety, Child’s Mental and Physical Development, Child’s Success, Child’s Health, Child’s Love (del Vecchio, 2003, 30).

The value in toys as tools for happiness is most probably the invention of adults, as toys 'have become the supreme emblems of the young child's dearest pleasures, a parent's way of saying how special and precious the child is', as pointed out by Kline (1993, 147). This is not a recent development, however. Children's toys have always echoed the hopes, dreams and priorities of adults, claims Pesce (2000, 25). Although toys have been used to control pleasures, perhaps more often they are still seen as tools for educational purposes when considering the play values adults want to communicate, when surrounding the child with toys.

The most important issue [in the design process] is that if it has a lot of play value, a feel if it's repeatable a child to go back to, is it, I surely believe that any toy can be a learning object. (TD/bb)

The concept of the toy or game as an educational tool is a thought that started to affect the culture of toys at an early stage – it gradually expanded from the seventeenth century onwards, notes Bordes (2010–2011, 17). According to Chudacoff, the American Toy Manufacturers' Association begun in 1903 to promote the use of their products for educational and socialization purposes (Chudacoff, 2007, 117).

The toy as a type of artefact remains an object that is on the one hand manipulated by the industry as a fun product to be affiliated with play, and on the other hand regulated by educationalists who always seem to have the need to see instrumental and hence utilitarian value in relation to play with toys. The developmental benefits that should somehow be integrated the toy have started to have an effect on the thinking of toy designers as well: 'Toys are a form of education', toy designer Peter Wachtel agrees (Wachtel, 2012). On the other hand, as one of my interviewees say, '[An ideal toy experience is] development from enjoyment (TD/rl)'. In the idea of Jenkins, there is an eternal countermove between these ideas: We never really resolve the tension between entertainment and education, he says (Jenkins, 156). What toy designers then meet with in their work, is a large solution space when thinking about the directions the design behind a plaything may take. To narrow this space, I have in this part of the chapter consulted some earlier writings on play value coming from different perspectives.



Toys as artefacts with various forms of play value.

The values, as presented above, tell a tale about what kind of values are approved (and what are less so) in toys. By looking at the concept of play value, it does in any case become easier to see the different standpoints adults take towards toys; what the industry regards valuable in the product, how the designer sees the playful artefact and the ways in which educationalists address toys as tools that come with developmental benefits. Most often the values, as discussed, here point to children and their potential behavior with playthings, like the last quote I will use here, taken from Chudacoff's book.

"Approved" play is that which follows beliefs, customs, and rules established by adult authority. But children's manipulation of objects for their own purposes creates true play value. ... Toys, then, can and do have dual function, one in the minds of adults and another in the culture of children (Chudacoff, 2007, 197–198).

What is missing in the discussions presented in this chapter, is the play value that adults will gain, when interacting with the toy. How I wish to contribute to the discussion then is by addressing the new toys and the hypothetically wider audiences for them to add another viewpoint to the debates that surround the questions in connection with play value. This will be done in Chapter 4.



Trash, 2010

Finally, toy researcher and psychologist Jeffrey Goldstein writes in an industry newsletter about the relevance of toys as things used in play: He says that ‘toys are relevant because they encourage and prolong play and are also safer than other products that are not made for children’ (Goldstein in TIE Newsletter, 25th of November 2011). This is perhaps too obvious a thing for many to see: That there really is an industry behind the playthings which because of numerous rules and regulations (and in some cases also for a genuine trust in the value of play) are producing toys that are specifically meant to be used in play and can be safely be allowed to be manipulated in play. Play scholar Singer says that ‘the availability of at least some toys at a relatively early age should undoubtedly enhance the likelihood of make-believe play for the young child’ (Singer, 1973, 238). In other words, toys are needed as props, because they expand the possibilities to play. In order to be played with as a toy, it must invite the child [and the adult] to ask questions such as: ‘How can I play with it? And how can it play with me?’ (Rasmussen, 1999, 50). In the simple idea as illustrated by Henricks, to “play with” an object is to experience the satisfactions trying to control it (2006, 186). It fits here well to quote one of my interviewees, who says that... ‘honestly just a [cardboard] box can be just as interesting for a kid, so you know, it’s not [about] forgetting the simple play value’ (TD/bb). Thus, even the simplest of objects can give gratification to the player, but in the design work behind toys aiming at toy experiences, this is something that is automatically expected of a toy. When played with, the player will release the potential of a good toy with play value. Therefore, it is of interest to look at players in order to understand what it is in the toy that makes them go ‘wow’.

I’m really inspired by the end-user connection, the earlier I’m inspired when I think about ...I jump really quickly to the commercial, almost backwards, you know to the thought of it what users would have done. So I think I’m more inspired by finding things that have an ending before, but also just imagining people when they play with it that inspires me, would somehow inspire me to find a new, better way to play.
(TD/dk)





Cubebot, 2012

Chapter 4: New times, new understandings, new toys

Wow-ness: Toying with (face) value

And the funny thing about toy design and the success of toys, I mean the next avid approach, you know the people in the industry are wondering what would the next trend be and that's a tough question to answer, especially if you look at patterns in the past years, you know that there are patterns for a lot of the big hits, right, stuff come and go and a lot of the big successes were completely unpredictable. (TD/r)

As shown in the previous part of this thesis, the test of a great toy is that it has play value. 'Such a toy appeals to the child's imagination, but it must also have in itself some indefinable imaginative quality that attracts a child and holds his interest' (Foley, 1962, 115). What this 'indefinable quality' in a toy that Foley points to is, in my opinion one part of the 'wowness' of the toy. Some of the successes that have happened in the industry 'were completely unpredictable' as one of my interviewees states in the quote above. But I ask at the same time, what we could have learned about the playthings themselves; their intrinsic qualities and the play patterns that they promote.

As the presented ideas about play value suggest, the toy must first and foremost be safe and sturdy, age-appropriate and intriguing in ways that relate to visceral, behavioural and reflective levels. It must be an object that invites and affords play and at best allows to be toyed with in many ways and repetitively. These prerequisites for a good toy with play value are easy to understand. What about the wow-ness, then, which will result in an unforgettable toy experience?

KH: How would you describe a toy experience?

Interviewee: At best it brings with itself kind of an enchantment, yes. I think of toys...or it doesn't matter to me if it's a work of art, an experience in nature, or a toy experience, but I seek the same kind of enchantment or atmosphere. Something of a delightfulness. But it may be...it can also be bittersweet... A totally clinical look does not intrigue me. (TA/kt)

We have arrived at an understanding of how the design of a toy may affect the responses of the player when he or she comes into contact with the plaything. When coming into contact with a character toy, the presumption is that we will become in one way or another intrigued of the artefact, maybe even 'enchanted', as described by one of my

interviewees in the quote above. The wow, as we have come to see, includes firsthand some kind of a surprise. We experience a delight when discovering something novel. Wiggins (2006) argues that surprise is a property of the receiver of a creative artefact - an emotional response. As discussed earlier in the thesis, most of us know exactly what 'wow' means. This is because we have experienced situations in our lives when something has made us so overwhelmed that there has been nothing more (or less) to say than gawp and go 'wow'. The wow is an essential element in lived toy experiences, but it is something that is hard to define or to put it into a few words.

As we have seen, toys themselves are more than material artefacts with physical dimensions. According to Stephen Kline, toys are fantasies condensed into objects (1993). When considering a toy character's ability to wow, one should then evaluate how these 'condensed fantasies' open up to players of different ages. Although I see the challenge in trying to analyze how the wowability of contemporary toys opens up to the player, I will in the following make an attempt to do so.

Additionally, what I am exploring in this part of the thesis is what it is in the contemporary toy that enables the manifestation of wow in the toy experience. The X-factor that will make a toy experience memorable is yet something that I believe can be explored, at least in terms of a retrospective analysis leaning on the past and lived toy experiences of contemporary toy players. Perhaps by looking at how the players see wow themselves, we can learn a lesson or two about what it is that constitutes wow and simultaneously, what should be taken into consideration when designing for future play experiences.

Mass-marketed toys are often criticized for their 'plastic' aesthetic, or a clear lack of it. According to Gielen (2005) 'children appreciate the possibilities for activities and the 'looks' of the product, whereas adults often remark that they appreciate the 'newness' of the design, being its lack of resemblance to existing toys, and the independent use by the child' (Gielen, 2005). So novelty is what is sought in a new toy, both by the players, purchasers (usually parents or other adults) and the industry itself:

So when you see a new toy, it shows how people badly want something new to happen. [...] just [a] sense of something you haven't seen or experienced before or that certain light in it that that I think of anyway, how do you create something that the first time you play with it you think that it's a new experience you haven't felt before. So that's what I think a good toy or a game is. (TD/dk)

Current literature on toys does not give direct suggestions on how the dimensions of play value that relate to the wow experience could be enhanced through design with a few exceptions. del Vecchio proposes that such toys should be invented that 'provide a multidimensional experience for the child (and adult)' (2003, 165).

Again, 'Dr. Toy', Stevanne Auerbach, suggests some useful words as a starting point when thinking about toy design. These concepts point to actions that the player can perform, when playing with the toy: 'hold, push, pull, unbreakable, mirror, fight, lift, wild toss, drop, soft, simple, washable, cuddly' (Auerbach, 2004, 43).⁵⁶

In my view, different toys cater for these needs better than others. I am sure that through toy play, each toy has something in it that will spark ideas and thoughts of possible play patterns in the mind of the player. These can result from either reflective or physical manipulation of the toy object. As the thesis concentrates on dolls, action figures and soft toys, the time has come to ask what constitutes play value in these toy types and in which terms this manifests as values related to the wow experience. For example, Auerbach sees the play value of dolls as 'endless' as they e.g. have collecting possibilities beyond the imagination (Auerbach, 2004, 106).

When the interest lies first and foremost in the adult toy players, it also becomes relevant to ask if there is something to be learned from toys employed in play at adult age and furthermore, what toy designers may learn by looking at other adults' engagement with the playthings recognized by toy players of today. We will learn more about these questions in Chapter 10 in which I will concentrate on profiling the play activities of adult toy players and their attitudes towards them. Now, let us begin by looking at what I suggest to enhance the play value of contemporary playthings further by looking at specific dimensions of toys of the present. By presenting these factors of value and at the same time different attitudes towards them from both the views of the industry and the player, I aim at a better understanding of what may at least partly contribute to the wow in toy experiences.

In the previous chapter, we have discovered that the concept of affordances may be useful when considering toy design. To develop the understanding of affordances in contemporary toy characters, we must explore and make a clear definition of the values related to these artefacts on a deeper level. In my suggestion, toy design would benefit from a conceptual characterization of what constitutes wow in toys addressed in this thesis; dolls, action figures and soft toys. One way of developing such a characterization is to look at which visceral, operational and reflective dimensions are perceived as valuable by the players. Consequently, it is of interest for the player that the toy will have values that are referred to here as values of "wow-ness".

The first operations of play, says Hakkarainen, associate with a need to control artefacts. The motive for these operations is to reveal the content of artefacts and their reality

⁵⁶ What these qualities or characteristics of the toy can actually be seen as, are perceived possibilities of action, in other words an idea presented in connection with the theory of affordances as presented in the previous chapter.

(Hakkarainen, 1991, 38–39, orig. Leontjev, 1981, 500). As we will see further on, in order for a toy to be interesting in contemporary cultures of play, it needs to afford manipulation and in these terms, control of the artefact on different levels.

It is my suggestion, however, that even the visually perceived ‘personality traits’ of a toy may, besides its manipulative qualities, be considered types of affordances that “invite” certain types of play behaviour. The presumption is that toys that include anthropomorphic elements such as a face as is the case with most character toys, invite the players to interact with them in more ways than toys without a face. Anthropomorphism affords the player to connect with the toy character and to become attached to the plaything. To design a certain feature into a toy, such as an expressive face, thus affords the player to for example discover possibilities to consider the toy to have a personality, even a ‘story’ connected to it.⁵⁷

Facial features are only one example of affordances in toy design. Suzuki notes that the amount and type of toy detail influences the range of stimulus functions the toy will enter in respect to the child’s response functions. In the toy play of children, less detail promotes a wider range of response functions, hence the more likely play will be called “creative.” Toys high in detail or structure are thought to hinder creative play (Suzuki et al, 1983).

What is of interest in this study, is to look at dolls, action figures and soft toys in order to see how different dimensions of these toys can be interpreted as visceral, operational and reflective affordances to be actualized by the player.

Many popular toy characters reach the status of an icon at some point. As Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris note in their book *Toying with God*, “no icon represents only one dimension or axis of a culture. Instead, icons become such because of their versatility, thick folds of meaning, adaptability to diverse individuals’ needs or interests, ultimate ambiguity, and open-ended nature.” Further, they claim, in order to succeed as an icon, it must be ontologically “empty”.⁵⁸ What this means for toy design is that the designer also has to consider a design that affords a ‘wide solution space’. In other words, a design that at the same time suggests and therefore invites certain types of play, but does not make the toy-to-be an uninteresting, closed object in terms of meaning and story. A toy that i.e. is in ontological terms ‘empty enough’. To help designers in understanding what playful affordances mean in character toys, one needs to examine in more detail which

⁵⁷ In a study conducted by researchers Johnson and Morton (1991) it was discovered that infants of both sexes have preferences for face-like stimuli, see Johnson, M.H. and Morton, J. (1991) *Biology and cognitive development: The case of face recognition*, Blackwell, Oxford.

⁵⁸ See Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 59, orig. Rogers, Mary, 1999, *Barbie Culture*. Sage Publications, London, 2.

elements contribute to an ontological balance or ‘play-ability’ in these playthings. In what follows, we will therefore first take a closer look at new toys as preferred by adult players and second, break down the wow-ness of these contemporary toys to be able to see which elements as employed by toy design are valued by the players of today. It is important to note here that in many cases adults do appreciate similar elements of wow-ness as children.

Realism vs. fantasy in toys

As stated in the previous chapter, toys should be regarded as consciously designed open systems that offer ideas about potential playing patterns, but at the same time leave space for the players’ own imagination in defining all kinds of possible uses. What is generally appreciated is the idea of open-ended play.⁵⁹

When considering character toys, we can see a two-way development. The trend in the ‘toy stories’ of designers seems to unfold in two directions; on the one hand towards reality and on the other, ‘out of this world’. Some toy characters thus aim at a close simulation of (human) reality, some come attached with fantasies condensed into three-dimensional objects. The aesthetical dimensions of the fantastic characters is sometimes hard to connect with human forms, nor with animal species whereas the toy characters with a close resemblance to humans are experienced as ‘too real’ and often seen as uncanny. Again, even the toy characters based on the fantastic are given traits of subtle human likeness to offer the player the possibility to identify and become attached to the toy. The pros and cons of realism versus fantasy in toys have been explored by for example Jerome Singer (1973, 148, 166). He raises the intriguing question of whether realistic toys might not impede fantasy development. In Singer’s study it was hypothesized that minimally structured materials such as blocks, clay, or simple rag dolls would stimulate children’s fantasy more than extremely realistic toys, which left little to the imagination. Like Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin also turned against naturalism in toys. In his opinion “the more boundlessly imitation expresses itself in them, the farther they lead from living play.” Simplicity lies in technique for Benjamin, not in abstract forms, notes Hoch (2010–2011, 111).

⁵⁹ These ideas are in traditional thinking best realized in abstract toys such as construction sets. One toy of recent years that has received positive feedback because of an innovative concept is the MakeDo. According to the press release ‘Makedo project kits are designed to encourage open-ended creativity and play’ (MakeDo Press Release, 2012). As I will demonstrate later, it is important to recognize this category of toys (construction) which is played with both by children and adults and because it has to come to have (and is probably even going to have more) meaning for the genre of character toys as well.

In general, the toys of the realistic kind are more frequently to be found in adult collections, and those of the non-realistic kinds in the playrooms of children, though this distinction in usage is never complete, claims Sutton-Smith (1986, 248). For example doll designer Käthe Kruse's doll philosophy developed as the dolls did. She felt dolls should be primitive and natural. She unintentionally developed a new doll type as she made her children's toys (Richter, 1984, 18). As my study will reveal later on in the course of the thesis, fantasy has come to play a major role in the toy cultures of adults as well. There has been some research which indicates that the structure of toys has an effect upon play behavior. Results of a study conducted by Suzuki et al. showed that non-detailed toys promoted more creative play than detailed toys and that detailed toys promoted more non-creative play than non-detailed toys. However, this study showed that 'realistic' toys are of interest for children: In other words, children show a strong preference for detailed non-creative toys (Suzuki et al, 1983).

Toy personalities

In 1965, Mary Hillier predicted in her book *Pageant of Toys*: 'Perhaps some of our dolls of today who survive the next hundred years will have gained a personality of some sort and a new race of collectors will admire the pert and pretty face of the twentieth century Miss, and marvel at the evidence of our Beat Generation' (Hillier, 1965). She was of course right in thinking this way.

Toy replicas have been made out of several icons of popular visual culture. However, as I have noted myself, dolls are also often made of media personalities of lesser status and endurance (such as Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi). Dolls have in recent times both praised and parodied real people as they have simultaneously presented us with the most fantastic creatures such as the zombie-inspired *Monster High* dolls made by Mattel.

In the realm of soft toys, it is far more common to find generic animals like dogs, cows and elephants than for instance greenflies, flies or spiders (Nelson & Nilsson, 2002, 85–86). However, recent toy characters show a far wider creativity in terms of themes. For example, there are toy characters inspired by microbes.⁶⁰ Alongside the fantastic Uglydolls, as discussed in the first chapter, the market thus shows that there are more 'species' of plush available than probably ever before. In the age of the designer toy, naturalism has clearly been challenged in the design of character toys.

⁶⁰ See <http://www.giantmicrobes.com>.

Researcher Vaula Norrena has studied what kind of animal characters Finnish children are attracted to. The study revealed preferences towards three types of characters: the cute, the odd and the scary. According to Norrena for example Pokémon characters are at the same time round and cute, odd and even scary (Seppänen, 2009). This proves the point of the global popularity of the Japanese aesthetic. Many contemporary toys, probably most in the category of soft toys, have started to express new approaches in terms of aesthetics.

As noted, the professional literature on toy design is scarce, if not almost nonexistent. Hints of what a designer (when designing a character toy) should pay attention to need to be derived either from already existing design work or the non-professional realm of toy design: What one may find in the field of adult hobbyist culture, i.e. arts & crafts (see for example www.etsy.com) is a rich and diverse culture of toy making. The handicraft trend that has become particularly notable during the last years of the first decade of the 21st century, has seemingly affected the do-it-yourself toy scene: Adults are, in many cases, indeed designing and making their own toys by hand and then sharing (and even selling) the outcomes of their creative work through Internet sites dedicated to a handicraft and design-conscious audience.

Undoubtedly, commercial toy design can learn something from the creative subcultures of DIY toy making and design. A handbook on hobbyist toy design states that 'the essence of designing toys is the making of patterns' (Saigny, 1971, 68). Whereas the design of the *form* and silhouette of the toy might be considered as critically important, the designer of a contemporary toy, nevertheless, has to pay attention to the raw materials, manipulability and facial features of the toy character as well. One important factor in designing character toys seems to be finding a balance of enough 'personality' (regarding e.g. aesthetic dimensions, back story) that will make the toy stand out from other characters on the market. On the other hand, there has to be enough space for the player to form his/her own ideas about the personality and story of the toy.

In the following, some qualities of the toy experience are addressed in more detail by 'dissecting' the elements of wow into components that can be understood in more pragmatic terms. The focus is on the visual, tactile, narrative and emotional elements of toys, although I do acknowledge that sound, smell and even taste may play a central part in some toy experiences. As the olfactory elements connect more to the category of infant toys, it is appropriate in the framework of this thesis to pay more attention to the visceral (and narrative) qualities that attract adult audiences to ludic engagement with contemporary playthings. The underlying assumption is that the additional dimension of play value, when discussed in reference to playthings, is a concept that closely relates with the 'wow-ness' of the toy. In general terms, play value has not been discussed



Uglydolls-a-plenty at the Super 7 toy store in San Francisco in 2009.

in earlier research when considering adults as a target group for mass-produced toy characters. Therefore, in the following, an analysis is made of what constitutes this play value in terms of a continuous wow: What makes a player become attached, bond with and cherish a toy character.

Amazing aesthetics: Visual value

Aesthetically oriented design is concerned with the visual dimension of things. Visual design is probably what design means to most observers. It is driven by form, colour, size and the desire to communicate value to the consumer without necessarily interacting with the product, claim Risdiyono and Koomsap (2011, 324). Furthermore, they say that the visual aspect of design means something that does not necessarily require interaction with the product. With this, I assume that they mean physical interaction or actual manipulation of the artefact, as in the case of many artefacts interaction can happen without tactile engagement. The toy player may for instance carry out a ‘silent dialogue’ with the toy, without touching it. This is of course, a reflective process.

Dewey considers aesthetic experience as a potential element of all experience and does not limit this experience to art alone (2005). MacDonald notes that ‘an inclusive definition of aesthetics is concerned not just with visual form, colour or texture, but with understanding and predicting the effects of information from all the senses on human perception and cognition’ (2002, 113).

As Kudrowitz and Wallace note: ‘We would say that if an object has a playful aesthetic or façade, it is not necessarily a toy product’ (2008, 4). But if a thing is a toy – an artefact produced specifically with playing purposes in mind, as is the case with contemporary mass-produced toys, which factors become relevant for the visual toy experience?

KH: If you think of the toy as an experience, as an object that offers a lived experience, what kind of toy should it be to generate a lived experience?

Interviewee: Of good shape, good size and good colour. Kind of you can glue and build on. (TA/1a)

The “aesthetic of the toy” is an interesting question that needs to be pondered upon in further detail. As we have seen, anything may be a toy if the player so decides. Also, many contemporary artefacts lean on a ‘toyish’ look. However, in this case, the question is not necessarily about a product meant for play, in other words a toy product. In a study by Karana and Hekkert, that looked into designers attributing meanings to materials (2008), ‘toy-like’ was considered to be smooth, light (weight), bright colours (red, blue, green, yellow, orange). Colouring, indeed, is an important factor in the contemporary toy:

When the idea first came up of My Little Pony, there was a division at Hasbro between the people who wanted to have fantasy colors for the ponies and those who said it should be like real colors, and so they tested it. The fantasy colors just blew the real colors away (Joe Bacal in Clark, 2007, 183).



Colourful toy characters in artist Katja Tukiainen's toy collection.



Colourful, cute and sometimes a little crazy. These are the elements of contemporary Japanese visuality in manga and anime which have come to have an effect on toy design on a global scale. Inflatable character photographed in Tokyo in 2009.

In the study of (Cila & Erbug, 2008) tangible qualities such as bright colour, rounded outlines and organ forms were found to summon up feelings of fun. Fun, as we have seen, is only one part of a toy experience and hence, only one part of the possible wow. Colour, again, as the quote regarding the test colours for the original My Little Pony series shows, can be decisively important an aspect of toy design, as it can attribute to the success of a complete series of toys. However, as Forlizzi et al argue, 'in an expressive object no single formal attribute (such as material, shape or colour) can be attributed to causing a specific emotional response' (Forlizzi et al, 2003, 30). We must therefore address the aesthetics of a toy on many levels.

Besides a certain colour scheme, many toys of today come with a multitude of tangible details. According to a study conducted by Suzuki et al, the amount and type of toy detail influences the range of stimulus functions the toy will enter in respect to the player's response functions. In this study which focused on children, less detail was found to promote a wider range of response functions (Suzuki et al, 1983). This corresponds with the thought of Walter Benjamin, who writes that imitation belongs to play, not in the plaything (Benjamin, 2005a, 116). In a way then, the toy designer can guide the playing activity by controlling the amount of detail in the toy (doll, soft toy or action figure) by



Tokidoki's Porcino is pink with an edge, 2013.

deciding if the toy should have similitude to reality or to be purely based on fantasy. As will be shown in the last part of this chapter, toys favoured by adults can be placed on a scale which defines their faithfulness to reality or on the contrary the fantastic. Let us take an example:

Hello Kitty – a character that the toy industry has made into toys millions of times – is made up of just a few solid black lines and dashes, but she's spawned some 50,000 products and been at the forefront of stylish consumer products for all ages for more than three decades' (Phillips, 2010, 60).

The development of Japanese art forms anime and manga in the recent years is moving more towards fantasy. Colorful, cute and sometimes crazy- these are the characteristics of Japanese visual culture (Kelts, 2007, 208). For example Pikachu, a well-known character from the Pokémon series, 'is an animated representation of precisely nothing we know in our physical world'. Kelts thinks that the reason for the popularity of characters like Pikachu is just one aspect of Japanese pop culture's creative freedom (2007, 17, 19).

Visual design is mainly focused on the creation of emotional value (Risdiyono and Koomsap, 2011, 324). Sometimes, this is the one and only value that may contribute to the wow experience. The discussion of the visual will be further elaborated on in Chapter 6, which explores the contexts of adult play activities. Visual culture as a realm is in this chapter addressed as a major playground for toys and their players.

Here it is important to conclude this brief passage concerned with the visual value of toys by recognizing that for some players, toys are first and foremost artefacts consumed by the eye. They are an eye-candy of sorts. After this comes the touch, and this is precisely, what I will discuss as the following ‘building block’ of additional play value, and thus an element that constitutes wow.

Feeling for things: Sensory value

Occasionally there can be times when materials or a process or technologies will invite the initial inspiration. (TD/sp)

After what can be seen with the eye, we will go to what can be sensed by the touch. ‘Feeling for things’ thus comes to mean both the exploration of material dimension and the emotional potential of a toy character.

Exploration involves investigating an object. The weight, substance and hardness of the artefacts that we touch affect how we feel and think, notes Pesce. He writes that our feelings for things are related to both our senses as to our sentiment and claims that much play is based on touch (Pesce, 2000, 22).

Manipulation as explored in the context of this thesis, refers mostly to the physical ‘toying’ with the plaything. In this manipulation, all the levels of human engagement are of interest; the visceral, the behavioural and the reflective. In my understanding these cannot be separated from each other. When trying to ‘dissect’ the wow, however, it should be stressed that it is important to understand these different aspects of engagement with the toy. In these terms, playing with dolls, action figures and soft toys can mean purely visual engagement, a silent dialogue, a form of interaction, although many players appreciate the tactile qualities of a toy.

Sensory play is rarely addressed by any other classification, as Kudrovitz and Wallace observe. ‘Some use the term “manipulative” play or “exploration,” but these can only be seen as elements of the ‘Sensory’. When this type of activity is enjoyed by older children and adults we would refer to it as play’ (Kudrovitz & Wallace, 2008, 3).

On the level of up into physical engagement with the toy, we usually pick the toy in our hands and explore how it can be altered for example – as is the case with dolls, soft toys

and action figures – by moving its jointed limbs.⁶¹ Walsh notes that the design of teddy bears in their early beginnings made them ‘poseable and unlike the dolls of that period that consisted mostly of wood, composition or porcelain’. In other words, the teddy bear was a ‘huggable’ toy from the beginning (Walsh, 2005, 18). Another example of early design work of toy characters which are ‘waiting for a child’s hug’, is the Raggedy Ann doll, with its perpetually outward-turned arms (ibid., 40).

The possibility of movement of the parts of a toy add to its play value. So does a pleasurable material in a plush toy, or the hair on a doll’s head. Toying with these sensory experiences may be an important part of the experience of the toy designer as well. Actually, the need for something to cuddle is such a natural instinct from childhood, notes Daiken in the early 1960s, continuing ‘that it is surprising that more use has not been made of it’ (1963, 120). In contemporary toy design, it becomes clear that designers are more conscious about a player’s need to cuddle. In the Uglydoll series, one can in fact find a character that explains this need in a humorous way in its back story:

You can totally count on Softy! Softy is made out of love. Need something done in a huge hurry? Softy knows a whole bunch of other folks willing to help! Math test got you down? That’s easy! Softy has six fingers! That should be plenty! Mega personal problems? Man, Softy is all over that! See? Out of snacks? Oh...oh Softy won’t be able to hold the tears back...please hold Softy (Uglydoll 2012 Catalogue, 38).⁶²

Stuffed toy animals are stimulating, visual playthings. Also, notes Auerbach, the connection between the player and the stuffed animal can be soothing. A feeling for things also refers to emotions of both the player and the toy. Soft toys are a source of communication (2004, 42). In recent toy design, so-called ‘emotional toys’ have risen interest towards playthings which may enable children and parents (and other adult players as well) to communicate about emotional states through the toy. The Kimochis series uses this thinking as a foundation for its products:

⁶¹ Poseability plays an essential part in play with many types of character toys. E.g. the GI Joe action figure, one of the first ‘dolls’ that was determinately targeted to boys, could in fact be seen as a ‘military mannequin that could be posed holding weapons and equipment’ (Walsh, 2005, 195).

⁶² ‘The Uglydoll line was first launched in January 2001, and is distinguished by an aesthetic that balances traditional cuteness with perceived ugliness. This family of plush, huggable, friendly, colourful characters inspires everyone they meet and encourages creativity. Each of the characters has its own name and personality making them unique. Kids love their soft cuteness and adults collect them for their humorous bios.’ (Uglydoll Press release Winter 2012).



Soft toys are traditionally associated with the concept of cuteness. This cat character was photographed by the author at The Istanbul Toy Museum in 2011.



A cosplay dressed girl with the Rilakkuma bear character as photographed by the author at the Licensing Show, Las Vegas, 2012.

Kimochi. Means "Feeling" in Japanese. Sometimes kids have strong feelings that can fuel challenging behaviors. Parents and educators can use Kimochis as a playful way to help children learn to identify and express feelings. When kids can communicate their feelings effectively, they develop positive social skills that lead to lasting friendships and success in all aspects of life (Kimochis sales brochure, 2012).

Everyone of us may have at least one favorite toy in our life that we want to hold on to, but the toy character, due to its back story can also express a need to be held and cuddled. The meanings of a back story will be discussed more in the following, but let us continue by addressing another important feature of contemporary dolls, soft toys and action figures, namely, their 'cuteness'.

Quest for cuteness: Affectionate value

I like cute things, that is part of it. And they allow me to make up stories. (TP/le)

In the 1980s, during my childhood years, one of the most intriguing toys I possessed was a baby gorilla toy. This was not an original Monchichi gorilla, but for my liking, much cuter. The baby toy animal had a soft chocolate brown fur coat, and one could place its thumb in its mouth in order to simulate thumb-sucking. Also, its eyes closed when you laid it to sleep. I do not remember if I ever gave the gorilla baby a name, nor whether it had a gender. But what comes to my mind every time I think of this toy is how it seemed so pathetic and at the same time so cute – something that was in need of attention and care. So the gorilla became a baby, more than any actual doll had ever been for me.

If we take a closer look at the history of the 'cute', as we understand it in reference to playthings, we may see that developments considering this dimension in toys are rather recent. Ngai notes that it was not until after the First World War (long after the invention of the Teddy Bear) 'that "cute" toys, in the sense of denoting an aesthetic of accentuated helplessness and vulnerability, began appearing in U.S. in mass quantities' (Ngai, 2005). If we take a closer look at the history of the teddy bear, again, we can see that the evolution has taken this character toy from a 'long-limbed bear to a cute, snub-nosed, baby-like creature' as in the words of Morris et al (1995, 1697).

How do we respond to cuteness, then? According to Cross, cuteness takes both the child and the adult to the edge of acceptable, to a playful and unserious anarchic moment. From the start, he notes, the cute was gendered, drawing on the characteristics of animals and urchins for boys and angels and coquettes for girls (Cross, 2004, 44). The gender split remains in toys, but especially with soft toys and designer toys in mind, a cute character may as well be gender-neutral in terms of its design.⁶³

According to Ngai (2005) commercial cuteness depends on pliability and softness. In other words, the cute object "invites physical touching". Such objects are typically given faces and, more importantly, large eyes (Ngai, 2005, 815 cited in Ivy, 2010, 23).

An aesthetic object is interpreted as well as sensed. According to Henricks, in designing play materials for young children, the designer usually creates rounded shapes and proportions that 'visually suggest a child, calling upon that unconscious human brain response that occurs when we see figures with baby-like proportions'. He claims that this

⁶³ In terms of play, what we usually do with a genderless toy, is to somehow categorize it regardless. The gender-issue in relation to toys will be more specifically addressed in Chapter 9. And as for the gorilla baby I'm referring to in my toy play journal above, I decided that it would be a boy.

reaction makes most people more open to play (Henricks, 1999, 332). Of course, media entertainment in various forms have utilized the childlike in many popular characters of the past. One of the ushers of character cuteness, one may say, has been Walt Disney with his baby-like, big eyed and somewhat clumsy characters like Bambi starring in numerous animations. But what is cuteness, if we concentrate on the face?

When you see the nose, eyes, forehead and when you are able to describe them, you relate to the other as if it is an object. The face is meaning, and they are meaning without a context. The face and language are connected to each other. The face talks (Emmanuel Levinas, 1996, 73–74).

As observed by the Lithuanian born philosopher Levinas, the face in itself equals meaning, as the face talks. How this has been used in character design for example at Disney, is by designing flowing lines, plump bodies, big eyes and rounded faces for the ‘goodies’ and thin, bony, angular types with little eyes that make up ‘baddies’ in animated Disney films (Barnard, 1998, 178).

When analyzing the principles of kawaii (Japanese for cuteness), artist Takashi Murakami found a system for what is cute in a character: In kawaii the scale of the following design principle is very important: A circle with the top half blank and the bottom half containing two dots for eyes and a smiling mouth (Lubow, 2005). The origins of kawaii, Ivy notes, ‘had to do with pity or empathy for a small or helpless creature – archetypically, a child or infant’ (2010, 13).

Hello Kitty continues to top the lists of most popular license characters. When analyzing the supposed ‘cuteness’ of this character, one may quickly observe that it has no mouth. The Hello Kitty character relies on its ‘superflat’ Japanese aesthetic. The cat does not come with a back story apart from its visuality. Manga-like figures like Hello Kitty, notes Brembeck, have had a hard time finding acceptance in Sweden because of their large eyes and immobile faces. In Sweden, the anthropologist notes, kind toys should smile (2008, 178). Yet in 2013, Hello Kitty remains one of the most popular characters the toy industry knows, also in Scandinavia. Yoko Yamaguchi, Hello Kitty’s official designer for the last 30 years says: ‘Red for friendship, pink for cute, yellow for heartfelt, green for wish and lavender for sweet’. Hello Kitty continues to change with her fans, says Yamaguchi (Phillips, 2010, 60). In Yamaguchi’s thinking then, pink is what communicates cute. If we explore the concept further, however, we can see that there are other dimensions apart from the face – and the dominant colour. Cuteness also can be controlled by the designer by paying attention to the proportions of the character, as regarding the design of video game character Super Mario:

Mario [of Super Mario] ...his head constitutes half of his body, he has a bulbous nose and big hands. This visually combines some of the ‘cuteness’ of Disney characters with the child-bodied look of many other manga and anime figures (Fleming, 1996, 183).

Moreover, as Morreall and Loy illustrate, cuteness ‘is a group of features that evolved in mammalian infants as a way of making them attractive to adults. These “releasing stimuli”...include a head large in relation to the body, eyes set low in the head, a large protruding forehead, round protruding cheeks, a plump rounded body shape, short thick extremities, soft body surfaces, and clumsy behaviour’ (1989, 68). In a static toy, as compared to a more dynamic game character, clumsiness can be expressed in the back story of the toy, as the example of the Uglydoll, called ‘Flatter’ demonstrates:

Flatter is one clumsy guy. The good times seem to fall right into his lap! How clumsy! Not only that, he’s so very awkward. Can you imagine he thinks our thoughts can create our reality? Yeah, right, like this tag you are reading started in someone’s imagination. Anyway, be kind to Flatter. As you can see, there’s a lot to learn out there (Uglydoll 2012 Catalogue, 37).

According to Sianne Ngai (2005) anthropomorphism is central to cuteness. Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects. Qualities such as smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy call forth specific traits such as helplessness, pitifulness and even despondency. In the thinking of Ngai, the cute object is the most “reified or thinglike of things, the most objectified of objects” (2005). Furthermore, to deliberately ‘under-stuff’ a soft toy can make the toy character seem floppy and vulnerable. This tactic has been used e.g. for the plush in the Beanie Babies series made by toy company TY (Walsh, 2005, 269).⁶⁴ Pitifulness is exactly what is spoken of when ‘adopting’ lonely-looking toy characters from various places, mostly from flea markets. As one of my interviewees says:

“It [soft bat toy] was pathetic, looked like trash, I wanted to save it and fix it.”
(ATD/pk)

⁶⁴ On the other hand, there is a tactic that aims in the opposite direction: To give a ‘super-stuffed’ feeling for the soft toy character by using a lot more of the polyful material to fill the toy. This is a way to distinguish the characters from other plush on the market, like e.g. in the case of the Monster Factory toys (See Monster factory Spring Catalogue, 2013).



A gathering of teddy bears as displayed at Hevosenkenttä Toy Museum in Espoo, Finland.

Becoming friends: Anthropomorphic value

Monster Factory. You can never have too many friends.
(Monster Factory Spring catalogue, 2013)

Anthropomorphism points to the human desire to antropomorphize – to view the inanimate and nonhuman as human. For example in the classic children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a stuffed animal becomes “real” because of the child’s love, as Turkle notes (2011, 31). It is important for a child to be able to identify the toy as an object seen before, either in real life or in a book, says Sarigny in a toy ‘design’ book from the 1970s. ‘Any little boy or girl will soon make the toy into a character they want it to be’ (Sarigny, 1971, 6–7). So on the one hand, a child can first identify the toy in terms of its familiar appearance, but on the other hand, as stated here, the child can make the toy into whatever character s/he wants. Humans are predisposed to anthropomorphize, to project human emotions and beliefs into anything (Norman, 2004, 138). People need other humans in daily life for reasons ranging from practical to the existential. This need is sometimes so strong that people create humans out of non-humans through a process of anthropomorphism (Epley et al, 2008, 143–144). Children tend to anthropomorphize more than adults (Carey, 1985).

You know, my children have a toy rabbit [...] Just before he had a dog, [...] my son who was twelve said “Bunny doesn’t talk to me anymore” like I didn’t know that he, like before when he started talking to me I was sort of “ha ha”. I didn’t know that he really, really talked to him. And it hit me right all when you speak about action figures and toys and the object becomes a prop where that freedom of state, it’s very rare of an adult to ever, ever experience that again. And so I think we have now the big challenge of how can we ever possibly elicit that in adults, it would be incredible without drugs. So I think that’s the big difference is that adults sort of differ you know a way and some of it in maybe art that is easier to reach for adults...whereas a toy, if it’s not a sculpture, a toy means that you can touch and play with it. It is a challenge to let adults immerse themselves in that fantasy. (TD/dk)

Digital media scholar Sherry Turkle sees anthropomorphism (as linked to robots) linked to ‘how we see robots as close to human if they do such things as make eye contact, track our motion, and gesture in a show of friendship. These appear to be “Darwinian buttons” that cause people to imagine that the robot is an “other”...’ (Turkle, 2011, 8). Yet, the interest here is on toys that appear far more ‘lifeless’ as compared to robots.⁶⁵ The dolls, soft toys and action figures I examined in the study have to be put in motion by the player. As Groos writes in the *Play of Man*, ‘the child playing with the doll raises the lifeless thing temporarily to the place of a symbol of life. He lends the doll his own soul whenever he answers a question for it: he lends to it his feelings, conceptions and aspirations [...]’ (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 203). The adult player may do exactly the same with the toy character; s/he either *lends* his/her own feelings to it, or uses the toy as a mirror in order to explore his/her inner thoughts.

[The seal toy] is tolerant, it has never criticised [me] about anything. It is a good listener. [...] Its passive presence has been important. (TP/ps)

It is generally known that play related to animals is important for children. Animals are anthropomorphized and they act like humans in play. Toys, again, are given lives by their possessors, like in the case of the comic series *Calvin and Hobbes*, where Hobbes

⁶⁵ When interviewing children in the 1920s, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget found that they took up the question of an object’s life status by considering its physical movement. For the youngest children, everything that could move was alive, then only things that could move without an outside push or pull (Turkle, 2011, 27, orig. in Piaget, Jean, *The Child’s Conception of the World*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1928) [La Représentation du monde chez l’enfant (1926, orig. pub. as an article, 1925)].

is a real tiger to Calvin, but a toy to everyone else. As Gorman notes, in toy-related literature (or ‘toy-tropes’), toys exist to serve the child (2011, 4). I would like to extend this notion to include adults as well.

As Taylor and Mottweiler report, children as young as two or three talk to their stuffed animals and listen to what they have to say. When a child creates a personality for a toy or invents an invisible friend to serve as a special friend, they claim that the child is engaging in a basic human urge. Adults, on the other hand, when thinking of an imaginary companion, such as a toy character, ‘tend to focus on the joys of having a friend who is always supportive and helpful and consistently loving, one who agrees with what you say, does what you want, keeps your secrets, and provides good company’ (2008, 47-48, 51).



Toy owner Pia Sissala shows her beloved seal toy in 2009.



A current example of a Cabbage Patch Kids doll, never taken out of the box, 2012.

When one lives alone the toy becomes someone to have a conversation with, a pet. It may even be an important spiritual companion. (TP/ps)

In the context of Japan, people who talk about and with things in the name of commodity fetishism is according to Anne Allison (2006) a condition whose symptoms are an intimacy with goods coupled with a deficit in interpersonal closeness. According to Sutton-Smith, the enthusiasm people have for stuffed animals has some similarities to relationships with pets. He writes: ‘Pets alleviate stress and loneliness and add good humour to our lives. It has been proven in laboratory settings that stroking an animal calms the nervous system and lowers the blood pressure of both the man and the beast’, (Sutton-Smith, 1986, 50).

‘It is here the problems of the animate and the inanimate occur’, says Susan Stewart (1993, 56). For Stewart the toy is the physical embodiment of fiction: ‘it is a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative. The toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not.’ The reason for people to animate the toys is in Susan Stewart’s view the desire to ‘experience everything simultaneously’ (1993, 57).

In del Vecchio’s view, the work of the toy designer needs to recognize the motivations humans have to anthropomorphize toys as s/he ‘is not making an “inanimate” toy and not selling just an “expressionless” plaything. He is carefully crafting a persona for the toy, one that is in dire need of being loved, protected, and nurtured. The toy’s neediness is the key element’ (del Vecchio, 2003, 76).⁶⁶

Once the toy becomes animated and gains a personality through human interaction with it, it initiates another world, the world of a daydream. The narrative time is, according to Stewart, not an extension of everyday life, but the beginning of an entirely new temporal world, a fantasy world parallel to the world of everyday reality (Stewart, 1993, 57).

He [the toy character] lives in a kitchen closet, where he has his own living room, which he shares with T [doll wife] and Höppänä [best friend, a toy monkey]. (TP/ap)

And yes, Marketta talks to her dolls as well. When passing by, she sweeps their skirts in place and dusts off their pretty noses (Salakari, 2012, 72).

⁶⁶ Toy companies have acknowledged and encouraged anthropomorphising of their products for a long time. For example, as Hoffman notes; “Cabbage Patch Kids are never bought; they can only be adopted” (Hoffman, 1984, 3). Toy companies are still referring to the popular tactic of adopting a toy. E.g. what is communicated in the MyBeastFriend marketing message is ‘the unique opportunity to create and adopt a friendly beast to address any personal fears or concerns’, see www.mybeastfriends.com.

As the two interview excerpts above illustrate, adults come to show that what Stewart says about the new, temporal fantasy world, stands true when looking at adult relationships with toys. Thus, a toy is first anthropomorphized and then given a personality. This personality inhabits either a fantastic or even physical world of its own as in the case of the toy character and his best friend the toy monkey. More importantly, the adult player, by these actions, creates the possibility for him/herself to have a dialogue with these characters and their worlds. According to Tabin (1992, cited in Crozier, 1994, 91) at a time when linguistic abilities of the infant are rudimentary, transitional objects offer the possibility of a 'dialogue' with the self. It seems that the activities that take place when adults engage with toys function in a similar manner, although for other reasons than the inability to communicate linguistically.

Seen in this way, toys can be addressed as 'aids to conversation' and on the other hand, as 'objects which extend the 'core self' (i.e. boundaries between self and object become blurred; for example, as we have seen to be the case with soft toys that can be described as 'transitional objects' (Crozier, 1994, 100). However (and somewhat surprisingly), Sherry Turkle notes in her observations about the play culture with contemporary toys that children find traditional dolls as "hard work" because 'you have to do all the work of giving them ideas'. On the contrary, technologically enhanced toy characters such as Furbies are hard work for the opposite reason, she says (2011, 39). What this means is that toys that are initially 'silent' may offer themselves more easily for adults as 'aids to conversation' as pointed out by Crozier, whereas children of today (based on their experiences of the abundance of toys) expect more from the toy character, in terms of interaction. Of course, the current market caters for these needs by creating toys that are animated and therefore not passive. As Turkle notes further, these toys make demands, 'they present as having their own needs and inner lives' (Turkle, 2011, 31, 39).

Coming back to traditional (non-technological) toy characters, too many of them may cause a situation that is not considered favourable for a child: Play scholar Marjatta Kalliala claims, that it might be too consuming for a child to have a relationship with for example too many soft toys (Laatikainen, 2011, 74). According to a study of people who write on discussion forums on the Internet, conducted by the Finnish Consumer Bureau, most of the respondents took a critical stand to soft toys: A child tends to accumulate too many of these toys (Keskinen, 2006). (I assume that no similar study has been made with adult players in mind, but one could argue similarly when the discussing collectors).

When considering the gender of the players in reference to the idea of a toy as an aid to conversation, Cassotti notes that girls speak to toys and create the type of social relations in which language is a fundamental. She further claims that boys 'want a more

physical contact with toys, they touch and throw them, try to understand how things work, disassembling and reassembling them' (Cassotti, 2005).

At adult age, being surrounded by playful objects is useful for getting in touch with the playful child within oneself. Whatever the way of interaction with the toy is, the object, on the other hand, is also an aid in formulating social interaction between people.

The toy gains immediate sympathy as the others [other people] see it peek out from the bag. (TP/ps)

We even communicate through Little-A [toy character] with my mom. She may call to ask about how Little-A is doing. (TP/ap)

When anthropomorphised, toys may become referred to as 'that little boy' as in the case of Little-A (TP/ap), or 'girls' as in the discussions between players of contemporary dolls, such as Blythe (Heljakka, 2011). While it is ok for children to anthropomorphise, tweens and teens seem to take a critical stand to their toy 'animals': A hobbyhorse hobbyist wants to make it clear that one is *not playing* with the hobbyhorses, but *hobbying* with them. The girls do not consider hobbyhorses as real, living beings (Nessi, 2011, accentuation mine). Next, the interest will turn more towards the personalities of the toy characters themselves, both from the perspectives of the industry and the toy playing audience.

Back stories: Narrative value

KH: What does a good or a memorable toy experience consist of?

Interviewee: A good story. (TD/dk)

As seen in the previous section, toys can provoke 'internal dialogues' as the playthings offer themselves as aids for conversation both on an intra and interpersonal levels. To remind ourselves once again, what children take from their experience with toys, writes Judy Ellis, chair of the toy design program at Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, 'is not the memory of the toy itself, but the reminiscence of individual play experiences, the stories, called up through their interaction with toys – part of a personal mythology that began before they could read or write' (Ellis, 2005, 50).

KH: Did you have a favourite toy as a child?

Interviewee: Yes, it was a Batman doll about this height [30 cm].

KH: In which phase of life did you get it and who gave it to you?

Interviewee: It was originally bought for my little brother. I was six years old and my brother was four. And it was such a howling unfairness, because it was I who liked Batman, not my brother. And then he got it, which was so shocking. Then I just kind of made it my own. So it became mine.

KH: Do you still have it?

Interviewee: Yes, yes I have it. I'll never let it go.

KH: Does it have a place of honour in your home?

Interviewee: Yes, it is there [laughter] on my bedside table. A lot of memories are attached to it and the greatest tragedy: My brother then became so jealous for me having it although he didn't care for it. So the one day he cut its ears off [laughter]. (TA/mk)

It is therefore known that the player may create any kind of personality and thus a story for the toy character. The toy story may come to include elements that came to exist not only in the characteristics of the toy itself, but the circumstances we experienced the interaction with the toy. As the example above shows, the stories that relate to toys may come to gain their significance also in the interaction that happens with other people.

One of the earliest and most profound theories that connects play and communication is Gregory Bateson's "theory of play and fantasy", note Frost et al. The theory states that human efforts, including play, are directed toward creating meaning. Narrative is one form that meaning can take (Frost et al, 2005).

We are a story-loving species, says Elkind (2007, 191). Homo ludens, the playing human, in is playing also homo narrans, the *storytelling* human, notes Kalliala (1999, 62). The most characteristically human skill of all is imaginative role playing in the context of storytelling and the dramatization of ideas and imagery (*American Journal of Play*, Fall 2009, Interview with Vivian Gussin Paley).

Vivian Gussin Paley has studied children in kindergarten environments especially focusing on how imagination plays out with or without objects. Toy play always includes the aspect of use of the imagination, specifically thinking about human interaction with character toys. One important part of play with toy characters is the story that is develops around the object during play. As Gussin Paley puts it: 'The narrative begins early. Even before the spoken word, the pictures in the young child's mind assume a storylike quality' (2005, 14).

A very young child cannot separate an object from its meaning; but when s/he starts to engage in pretend play, and uses an object to represent another. It is in this activity when meaning begins to be separated from the concrete object, writes Smith. Much object play involves pretense (2010, 32, 147). Engel (2005) argues that the integration of play and storytelling skills allows children to engage in two types of narrative play, which she calls *what is* and *what if*. In what is play, children pretend the kinds of things they know in their everyday world; in what if, they go beyond this into more fantastic realms beyond their direct experience.⁶⁷

Gussin Paley states that children have a natural desire to tell a story (2005, 110). Children's interaction with toy objects often plays out in verbal show-and-tell. In other words, children have the need to explain what the toy character represents, what the character is thinking, saying and doing. The object is needed to trigger this process, claims Gussin Paley. A character's name is already a story in itself - sometimes that is enough to create an entry path to the story world of play (2005). As seen by Singer and Singer (2007, 1), the capacity for imaginative thought begins to appear by the third year of life when children start to play games or pretending, to verbalize their stories out loud. Storytelling continues in one form or another in adult life – and as will be demonstrated in Chapter 10 – at adult age, also in the company of toys.

The creator of Cabbage Patch Kids, Xavier Roberts, has said: "People of all ages respond to make-believe. If you pretend a baby is real and say he likes peanut-butter cups or is scared of dogs, a child takes it up, and pretty soon the baby has a complete personality" (Hoffman, 1984, 31).⁶⁸ It therefore becomes necessary to point once more to the fact that creating a toy character 'requires that the toymaker realize that he is not making an "inanimate" toy and not selling just an "expressionless" plaything. He is carefully crafting a persona for the toy, one that is in dire need of being loved, protected, and nurtured. The toy's neediness is the key element', writes del Vecchio, (2003, 76).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Smith, 2010, 175 orig. Engel, S. (2005) "The narrative worlds of what is and what if", *Cognitive Development*, 20, 514-525.

⁶⁸ Xavier Roberts, the designer of the original Cabbage Patch Kids spun, from the start 'elaborate tales about his various "kids" – what they liked to eat, what scared them, what their favourite TV show was and, most of all, what they all longed for: adoption into a loving home' (see Walsh, 2005).

⁶⁹ In its most extreme, the toy may become a needy companion as Sherry Turkle notes about Tamagotchis and Furbies that 'they did not want to play tic-tac-toe, but would tell you if they were hungry or unhappy' (Turkle, 2011, 30) and according to my own opinion, they became more pets than toys. 'Needy toys' came to receive yet another eerie dimension in the case of the Cabbage Patch Kids 'Snacktime Kids' series, in which the dolls 'ate anything that came in their way, including the long hair of their adoptive parents' (Walsh, 2005, 255).



"Organs sold here" plush toys represent new types of toy characters. 2013.

A 3D medium [such] as toys is more focused on creating characters than creating an overall image. [Compared to other forms of visual art, it's a question of] character vs. image. (TD/Is)

The back story, or "story line" as Chudacoff coins the term, means that unlike dolls of the past, fantasy play characters of the present come with their own pre-written personalities and story lines that supposedly discourage a child from inventing an original play world.⁷⁰

As for the history of toys, however, most playthings did not have stories associated with them. Storymakers and toymakers lived in separate worlds, writes del Vecchio (2003, 142). The narrativisation of toys developed, according to Fleming, along with the increasingly important concept of 'total' or multi-media marketing aimed at children (1996, 103). One of the early examples from past toys that shows the significance of a pre-narrated

⁷⁰ See Chudacoff, 2007, 9, 221 also Recchia, quoted in Barnes, "Where Did You Go, Raggedy Ann? Toys in the Age of Electronics" *New York Times*, February 10, 2001, C1. Moreover, Disney referred to his enterprise as 'imageneering' – the engineering of imagination, notes Kline. Disney had his own deep belief in the power of the characters he created to capture children's imagination (Kline, 1993, 113). I can see similarities between the creation of animated characters and character toys. The engineering of imagination may happen in different ways (some tilting more on the visual, and some on the verbal) but the fact remains that in order to be strong, a character needs a personality that the player/viewer may have contacting surface to. This engineering of imagination can also happen through many media; it is for example common for toy characters to have their own Facebook pages today.

back story, are the Cabbage Patch Kids. As Berg notes, these dolls come with 'adoption papers, birth certificates, names and orders to be hugged daily...' (Berg, 1986, 209). For the author, what was already beginning of the toy story and thus the lived toy experience, was the fact that my Cabbage Patch doll came with an already chosen name. I kept this name for the doll and so did my sister and cousins for theirs.

Brought out in the early 1980s, Strawberry Shortcake, a plastic doll (an action figure for girls, if you want) wasn't according to Kline just another doll promoted by mass-market advertising. She was not only a sellable image 'but an identifiable character, carefully crafted and conveyed through advertising and two of her very own TV specials' (Kline, 1993, 139). This doll was one of the first toys that I received, which was connected with this narrative universe that came to include various connections to media and play materials. Moreover, what was special about the doll was its connection to other characters in its product family, like a cat named Custard, or a (boy)friend named Huckleberry Pie.⁷¹

In toys, the back story somehow relates to the personality of the toy character. This story gives possible clues about where the character came from, what its name and attitude towards life is. In more detail, the back story may reveal personality traits or moods of the character. For example in the case of the Monster Factory characters, 'each monster comes with their own name and humorous write-up, which manages to capture their character perfectly in two sentences. These descriptions are relatable and amusing, and make monsters that much more irresistible'.⁷²

It is notable, however that the back stories do not necessarily come in written format only, but may be embedded in the visual features of the toy character as well. To give an example of this, the toy characters based on human organs (!) from the company I Heart

⁷¹ The doll came with a scent, which I still remember today. Also, my father carved a house for the dolls both my sister and I had, which came to give the toy experience a further dimension. For a birthday, I received a miniature version of the Huckleberry Pie character and the dolls lived in a special space in my bookshelf for a long time. Scent, although not addressed here in particular, may manifest as an important element in the toy experience, especially in plastic toys. The olfactory experience in the first encounter with toys such as My Little Ponies or Barbie dolls which in my childhood could be purchased from a store specialized in selling all kinds of plastic products still reminds me that toy experiences need to be examined as multimodal product experiences. Even until today, I still remember the faint smell of plastic toys which aroused excitement in my mind: One day I would again visit that store and purchase a new addition to my pony collection. In the case of Strawberry Shortcake the scent was a deliberately designed affordance. As for the other toys, perhaps an unintended bi-product.

⁷² See Monster Factory Spring Catalogue 2013. Moreover, back stories of today do not limit themselves to ready-made toy characters, but are even used to tell the stories of characters that the players first put together. See e.g. www.magnote.com for examples of (paper craft robot) character stories; "Stealth: Loves to play hide and seek but plays so seriously that no one can find him" and "Slimy: Loves snacks. Always gets sweet sauce everywhere".

Guts already have a back story that is parallel to how the organs function in actuality, but the toys' silhouettes are related to the form of actual organs as well. Nevertheless, these toys have been given a written 'story' too: "Uterus, womb service: She's in charge of bleeding and breeding! Our super-soft, super-pink, super-fabulous whopping womb... comes PMS-free" and "Testicle, having a ball: This super-soft blue ball comes with a handy hang-tag telling you all about your testicles".⁷³ While the aesthetic of new toys draw people in visually, it is as described in the Monster Factory catalogue, 'the amusing write-up that keeps them captivated'⁷⁴.

The fondness towards storytelling does thus not limit itself to the players, but is already considered as a possible direction of design from the perspective of the toy designing person or company, as illustrated in the following three examples:

Zombiezoo is a family of fun loving animals including Boo the black cat, the natural born leader of the group, and Stich, a pig obsessed with hygiene. Along with their friends, Muck, the "party animal" monkey, Rob the poetic rabbit and Toxic the competitive red snake (Zombie Zoo Press Kit, 2012).

Each Kimochis plush character (From the Plushy Feely company) comes with a set of three feelings and How-To Kimochis Feel Guide. Characters in the line include Kimochi Cloud, described as moody and a bit unpredictable; Kimochi Bug, a caterpillar that is afraid of change; and Kimochi Hugtopus, who is all smiles and giggles. (Playthings magazine, February 2009, 42-67) "Bug is a caterpillar who is afraid of change. When Bug is feeling afraid, his wings fold up and tuck-away in the pocket in his back and when he's feeling brave he spreads them to fly!" (Kimochis sales brochure, 2012, 4).

These seven characters have grown from carbon creatures drafted on a piece of paper to living beings made of fabrics and threads. Their world is rooted in childhood when questions rise over life and death, love, friendship, working, playing and the whole spectrum of emotions which so often go beyond our understanding (Deaddy Bears sales brochure, 2010).

Postmodernism stresses the playful and narrative potential of the most mundane things, says Rees (1997, 131). In toy characters, the storyness is an integral part of the

⁷³ See *Organs sold here*. I Heart Guts Fall 2012 – Winter 2013 catalogue.

⁷⁴ See Monster Factory Spring Catalogue 2013.



Brip Drip (Uglydoll) and Juneë (Pecanpals) toy characters illustrate how the back story comes attached with the toy in the form of a booklet, 2013.



My Little Pony has a fantastic character in year 2013. In the background an episode of the "Friendship is magic" animated series is running, 2013.

development, design and marketing of toys and as we have seen in the last passage, also a significant part of the toy experience, where the 'personality' of a toy may function as a potential beginning of a story to be continued by the player. The presence of a back-story may bring the symbolic context of play into a narrative form, as Kline has noted in association with the Barbie doll (1993, 170). Just like a single word such as a name for the toy may open up a whole universe of the toy story to continue in play, a single word may in itself represent the back story of a toy. As shown earlier, the Teddy Bear received its name from U.S. president Theodor Roosevelt because of a colourful series of events, but this story is perhaps only viewed today as minor detail in the history of playthings. As for the contemporary toys, the playthings may communicate whole lifestyles in one single name, such as in Rilakkuma (a combination of the Japanese pronunciation of relax and the Japanese word for character) who is a teddybear with a Hello Kitty like visuality.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ See <http://san-x.jp>.



Pecanpals-a-plenty from Noferin at Ratafugi toy store in Chicago, 2012.

As Long reminds, many transmedia narratives are not the story of one character at all, but the story of a world (2007, 48). Apart from giving the toy a character and a personality, in many cases it needs an environment, i.e. a family of other toy characters (a series of products) to which it may relate. Just like in digital games, whole worlds are created in toy design and the back stories thus expand from singular characters to entire toy universes. However, in some cases the development of this world may begin with a single character.

Media exposure ensures that children get new material upon which to build make-believe and toy-related fantasy play (Singer & Singer, 2007, 165–166). Children use fantasies, stories, and media images in building their sense of self, claims Jones (2002, 9). Based on the assumptions made from the materials used in my study, so is the case for the toy playing adults.

The back stories of the toy do not limit themselves to the physical toy, but extend to various dimensions of material and visual culture, as we have seen in the early example of Strawberry Shortcake. A more up-to-date example (although the Strawberry

Shortcake ‘universe’ has since been re-launched), is provided by the equally re-launched toy and media universe, My Little Pony. The animated Pony-related series *Friendship is Magic* rolled out in the U.S.A. in October 2010. The assumed target group for the series were 3–6 year old girls and their mothers. When the series appeared on the Internet, it reached an unexpected audience, of 15–30 year old men.

Nowadays, the toy designers and the companies behind their production and marketing seem to consider a wider audience in terms of toy players. ‘Each Uglydoll possesses its own distinctive characteristics that everyone can relate to’ (Uglydoll press kit, 2009).

Uglydolls come attached with narrative ‘glue’. This means that the characterizations are important. In the end it is the stories around the individual dolls that make them sell, claims Walker (2004). So the designer is not only a communicator (Motozzi, 2010, 48), but in the case of toy design, also a designer of the narrative.

However, as we have seen, the back story may be a simple one, as in the case of the Uglydolls: Actually, a part of the appeal is, as McNeil writes, ‘that Uglies are not based on TV characters; the only back-story a buyer gets is a tag with a few sentences on it’ (McNeil, 2008). The formula for success, according to Uglydoll designer David Horvath, is that the dolls tell a story (Carter, 2011):

I remember the immediate appeal and connection that the characters had for me. They are simple in design, expressive in personality and once I got to know David and Sun-Min, I learned there was a mythology and world behind this (Fleming, 2011).

Toys that come with a preset collection of ideas about who the characters are and how children should play with the toys, are considered a negative aspect of contemporary toy culture. Brown argues that ‘this kind of performed script can rob the child of the ability to create his own story’ (2009, 104). Toys facilitate and stimulate certain practices of play and not others, Maaïke Lauwaert agrees. However, she says, this stance does not take into account the fact that the players use toys in unpredicted and divergent ways as well (2009, 13).

To achieve a well designed toy character with enduring potential, the back story should not be complete, but leave room for the player to attach her own ideas about the toy and its world. Matthew Kapell and John Shelton writes of Star Wars: ‘we become not just those who experience the story, we become part of the story itself’. Kapell and Shelton suggest that as much as the films of the Star Wars saga are stories about a galaxy ‘far, far away’ they also are a story about ourselves and our place in the current world (Kapell & Shelton 1996).

Then, a mythology behind toy characters may be appreciated, but ‘imperfection, gaps and a multi-layered structure allow a diegetic world to gain cult status when put in the hands of fans’, writes media scholar Matt Hills (2002, 134). Similarly, toy players appreciate the beginning of the toy story, but do see incompleteness and versatility as positive, as one of my interviewees says:

...appealing toys are those which can be modified and that may be repaired if broken. And toys that do not have such a grand narrative behind. (TR/rk)

European design critic John Thackara observes that postindustrial innovation isn’t about the design of objects; it’s about design of experiences. As Crossley notes, design is now less about creating actual artefacts and more about creating and staging a new compelling story for people to experience. ‘The story side of the product has become an ever-important part of the decision to buy’ (2003, 35). The storyness of contemporary toys, seen in this light, affects buying behaviour.

From a toy industry perspective, “storylines should support a highly extendable and flexible product line” (Morency, 2012, 136). Not only are toys made of movie characters, but the other way around. Widening the story world of toys onto the screen is, according to Palmiere, more economical for the big industry players than acquiring a toy license for a cinematic film (2009).

Brian Flynn, toy designer at Super 7: ‘I think that the storytelling behind the character is always important. If you just create a toy for the sake of making a toy, it is only going to be marginally interesting. People want to understand who the character is’ (Vartanian, 2006, 34).

Furthermore, the back story gives the toy a reason for being, says Miller-Winkler (2009, 19). In comics, writes Herkman (1998), Seymour Chatman has suggested a theory of ‘traits’⁷⁶ according to which the reader interprets a comic character. The different traits of the character are clues to the reader, through which one may formulate an image of the meanings incorporated in the character.

According to Lankoski who writes about character-driven game design in the area of digital games, designing and implementing a non-protagonist character is quite similar in games as in other media. The ‘bone structure’ of a three-dimensional character

⁷⁶ See *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1978, 127.

consists of physiology, sociology and psychology. The first (physiology) means attributes such as sex, age, weight, height, colour of eyes, hair and skin, posture, possible defects/ deformities, abnormalities, appearance and distinct features, hereditary features and physique. The second (sociology) means preferred activities such as amusement and hobbies, and the third (psychology) ambitions, life attitude, obsessions, complexes, imagination, intelligence and temperament (Lankoski, 2010, 86–87). This tripartite structure of video game characters is at least partly suitable in analysing contemporary toy characters’ back stories in terms of form and ‘personality’. Let us take two examples:

Ice-Bat, comes from an Ice Cave and loves hiding inside Ice Chests. Everything he touches turns to Ice...yet profoundly he warms your heart. Ice-Bat thinks you are cool and he wants to chill with you. He wants to hang out with you... or just hang upside-down, if that is OK with you! Ice-Bat is there for you when you feel like you may be losing your cool, or feeling like a fool. Don’t panic! Don’t stress! Grab Ice-Bat and put him to the test (Uglydoll Press Kit, 2008).

Hammer is immune against disasters! For instance, Hammer loves taking the plane. He is a brilliant mind, insatiable to learn about everything, he is the scientist of the band. He is brave-hearted and would taunt any danger to help his friends out of a nasty trap (Fear Hunters sales brochure, 2012).

As the examples above illustrate, contemporary toy design wants to give the toy character such traits as communicate a nurturing attitude; not only is the player expected to care for the toy character, but if necessary, it will ‘be there for you’ as in the case of Ice-Bat and ‘help friends out of a nasty trap’ as in the case of Hammer. Interestingly, in both of these two examples the toy characters are referred to as male.

Giving the toy characters mischievous personalities is a recent development. Many characters are advised to be kept out of trouble like the Piggy Wiggies character LeLu [literally and probably coincidentally, meaning toy in Finnish language]: “LeLu is the youngest in the family. She’s very artistic and intelligent. She likes to socialize, so introduce her to all your friends. She needs lots of sleep and loves affection. Make sure you look after her and keep her out of trouble...”⁷⁷

Today, the back story may even point to ‘narratives’ about the toy designer. For example in the case of Piggy Wiggies, soft toys produced of socks and buttons, the story of the

⁷⁷ See <http://piggywiggies.com/shop/lelu>, accessed March, 2012. Another example is the Korilakkuma bear, the sidekick of Rilakkuma, who according to the manufacturer Dream International U.S.A, Inc. ‘is sometimes too much’. See Dream International U.S.A, Inc. brochure 2013.

designer plays an important part in the marketing of the toy: “An animal and cuddly toy lover, Emma Louise started on a mission to make the cutest sock animal anyone had ever seen... and from that, Piggy Wiggies were born” (See <http://piggywiggies.com/> about accessed March, 2012). The story of the toy designer may also have its beginnings outside of the traditional realms of toy making, as in the case of the Mua Mua dolls:

This cool project – much more fun than Christian Louboutin’s Barbie, who takes herself too seriously – all started in 2007 when Ludovica Virga, on holiday in Bali, met a woman on the beach making crochet bikinis. After having bought a couple (just to help the lady, because Ludovica hates crochet bikinis) she asked the woman to make her some dolls. The rest, as they say, is history. The Balinese woman is now the director of the ten people that work in the Andy Warhol inspired Mua Mua art factory in Bali, and hand stitch the fun “creatures” (each one takes 3 ½ hours to make) which are then flown to the best Italian and international stores.... Or buy them online on the mua mua website where you will find also the photos of the designers with their mini me’s (See <http://www.muamudolls.com/>, accessed March 2012).

Emotional attachment: Sustainable value

The doll listens, doesn’t argue and wipes the tears away. (ATD/aj)

...I have toys in boxloads and shelfloads and a lot of everything [toys], but I have a favourite, the one [that I have used the most] here, this totally irresistible little bunny. It has this dress on it and it is always curious about the world, it goes around and all kind of things happen [to it in artworks]... (TA/ht)



Sometimes, a product is the object of our emotion, sometimes the product is the cause, and sometimes it is both, writes design scholar Pieter Desmet (2002, 6). In toys, as we have seen, it is often the back story of the toy, which in visual or verbal ways may contribute to an initial wow that leads us to ‘become friends’ with the toy. Toys may indeed come to have emotional value for both the purchaser and the player. Emotional attachment in itself is important when considering the wow-factor or the toy and on the other hand its longevity and life-cycle: its ability to give that certain ‘glow’.



Recent examples of contemporary teddy bears as presented by movie character TED and Rilakkuma photographed by the author at the Licensing Show in Las Vegas, 2012.⁷⁸

Sometimes, the back story points directly to the willingness of the toy character to form a relationship, as in the case of Nola, the cuddly green Monster of Loneliness:

Nola, the cuddly green Monster of Loneliness lives in a world of sunny skies and beautiful landscapes, but she is missing one thing...a friend. Her wide-eyed stare and squeeshy tummy make her an ideal candidate for hugs and kisses. She also sports a standard belly button made for tickles! She would love to be your best friend! (See www.worrywoos.com).

According to Oatley et al (2006, 403), emotions are at the center of narrative literature. Stories are important to developing a feeling of attachment (Fukuda, 2010, 3).

⁷⁸ The Rilakkuma backstory goes as follows: “Rilakkuma is a bear who enjoys laying lazily anywhere. He is always free from stress! Just by looking at Rilakkuma, you will find yourself in a relaxed mood. Rilakkuma is a new type of inner healing character. He likes pancakes, dumplings, omelets and puddings. He also enjoys listening to music, watch TV, and soaking into hot springs.” See Dream International U.S.A, Inc. brochure 2013.

As we come to understand and care about characters, we come to care about what happens to them and thus become involved in the plot and get transported by the text into a fictional world (Cohen, 2006, 186). In toy play, it is possible for the player to continue the toy story as originally started by the designer.

Adult wishes have been projected into the production of playthings, which has then resulted in their idealization (Lönnqvist, 1981). Lönnqvist says that in playthings, only the ideals of society are being shown – they offer escape from reality, a life without catastrophes, grief, accidents, death, sickness and old age but also without emotional life (Soini, 1991, 7).

As my inquiry into the cultures of contemporary toys with a special focus on character toys shows, this does not hold true to this day. Artists use toys to express a multitude of emotions and themes in their works. Toy designers have used sadness as an emotional trigger on toy characters' faces for a long time. Finally, contemporary toy design utilizes dark themes such as death and accidents to explore the uncanny dimensions of toy aesthetics. Toys can thus have various strategies embedded in their personalities, that trigger our emotions. They too can be sad as in the case of the Kimochi character called Cloud: "Cloud is a bit moody and unpredictable. Depending on his mood, he can be happy or sad by just turning his head" (Kimochis sales brochure 2012, 4).

According to Phoenix, character merchandising is based on the idea that the buyers will respond with more interest to an item that has some kind of personality-and buy it – than they will to an object that has none (2006, 27). Seok-hee Lee from MoMA says, that it is the personalities of the Uglydolls function as hooks for attachment. "The more you get to know each character, the more you get attached" (Mustafa, 2006).

The puppets help me to feel grounded as I travel a lot, I make myself laugh with my puppets, they comfort me. (TP/le)

We are often emotionally attached to our possessions: We are not only touching objects but are being touched by objects. They may even seem to give us comfort, as the quote above illustrates. This means that objects evoke feelings in us. As Norman argues, it is important to understand what creates the emotional aspect in designed objects. According to Norman, it is not a question of design, but rather it is a matter of the meanings we attach to the object (2004, 47). According to Oatley et al (2006, 109) creative expression arises out of emotional experience. Designing a product has been said to be designing a relationship, so it is inevitable that we need to fully understand people's relationships with objects, other people, environments, and so on, claims Crossley (2003, 39). Toys are objects and vehicles which communicate emotions, says

toy designer Shalito (2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). Therefore, by designing emotions 'into' the toy character, the designer may affect the formulation of emotional attachment to the toy.

The appropriation of a toy object means that the player is the master, the toy the subordinate which is open for manipulation by its player. The superiority of the player in comparison with the resilience of the toy makes the player more attached and even protective of the toy. Having too many toys may result in that children find it difficult to become attached to toys and select the ones that stimulate the fantasy and imagination, claims Elkind (2007, 18). An ideal toy experience, according to Dr. Toy, Stevanne Auerbach, would then mean a long-lasting relationship to a toy character.

KH: What would the ideal experience with a toy be like?

DrT: That the child not only enjoys it from the beginning, but they want to go back to the toy, that they get attached to it, a teddybear...

Even the basic teddybear can be an important emotional plaything. (TD/sp)

As both of the interview excerpts above demonstrate, even the simplest toy can become important to its player. Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara agrees by saying that 'the toy is completed not just because it has a nice finish or because it looks a certain way. The toy is completed when the person that owns the toy has developed a relationship with it and played with it and slept with it and had it next to them...that's when it becomes a toy' (Phoenix, 2006, 93). In the *Toy Story 2* film, the character of Buzz Lightyear says dewily, "Life's only worth livin' if you've been loved by a kid" (Booth, 1999).

In some [art works] the favourite toy may be a character that has been found at a flea market or somewhere. I have, for instance, a little bunny figurine which is very dear to me, something like 8 cm tall, I think it is so pitiable and of all the characters that are a part of my art the most...the one that leaves the biggest mark and it is because, it is so disregarded and sensitive and innocent and all of that. (TA/ht)

Furthermore, as Pesce notes, a toy can have feelings that can be hurt. In a way, the toy can become a tool for the child to understanding his/her own feelings (2000, 72). It is important to note here, however, that children do not automatically bond with playthings: Adults actively encourage children to create relationships with them, as Ruckenstein points out (2011, 7).

Also, as another of my interviewee's notes; 'There's a lot of emotional ways to be attached, memories at a circumstance, a sense of attachment to acquiring the toy, showing the toy to somebody or maybe the person that gave the toy to you as well, so I think affect is good and then you appreciate it in a different way'(TD/r1).

You may find yourself asking the same question I asked myself, how do I pick and Ugly to come home with me? My advice is, let them pick you! Picking an Ugly Doll is not entirely unlike picking a dog or cat, just browse...the connection will be there if its meant to be (Cozzarelli, 2010).

In this part of the chapter, we have explored possible factors that contribute to the wow of the toy and thus the experience that the players come to have when acquiring and playing with the toy. The industry and the toy designers will have their say about what it is in a toy that makes one go 'wow'. Ultimately, it is the player who surrenders for this magical experience.

The ultimate toy, would according to Sheenan and Andrews, 'suit girls and boys equally, appeal to adults as primary purchasers, be available in the shops or online at less than £30 (some 35 euros for a high-value toy), provide some educational effect, create enormous 'play value' via e.g. interactivity expand or advance as the child grows up, be safe to use, allow easy storage, be recyclable, enable children of different ages to play simultaneously, develop intergenerational loyalty, benefit from peripheral products and community, support the many different kinds of play: boost social skills, imagination, coordination and physical development. Additionally, the toy should be robustly made and should be FUN!' (Sheenan & Andrews, 2009, 94). By fulfilling the list of requirements as provided above, a toy designer would probably land with a great toy. As we have seen here, however, I have tried to go deeper with my analysis of what it is that contributes to the wow (and face value) when discussing character toys. Therefore, I suggest that the wow may be determined at least in how the player experiences certain factors (one or more) integrated into the design and play value of the playthings, such as visibility, materiality, cuteness, back story, and a possibility to become emotionally attached with the toy character. Also, what I propose is that these factors, when designed into the toy through affordances, may result in long lasting and thus more sustainable toy experiences.

KH: What would an ideal toy experience be like?

Interviewee: I guess what could be the ideal is would create a positive memory, whatever that positive memory is; it might be fun, it might be gross, it might be hectic, so the player goes at some point in their life after they have played that game they have a memory of having played it and they're glad they did. (TD/tg)





Finnish designer Eero Aarnio's designer toy creations, photographed at the Hevosenkentä Toy Museum in Espoo, Finland, 2012.

Designer toys

In targeting playthings towards the adult market, the Adults are assumed to Stay Younger Longer (ASYL) and in many cases, so are in many ways their toys. By this I mean that dolls, action figures and soft toys – in most cases the so-called *designer toys* – preferred by adults convey infantile features such as a disproportionately large head, big eyes and short limbs.⁷⁹

KH: How would you define a designer toy?

Interviewee: A designer toy, a toy that you don't play with. [Laughter] (TD/r)

⁷⁹ According to Frederik Shodt – author of *America and the Four Japans: Friend, Foe, Model, Mirror* – the big eyes characteristic of Japanese anime were borrowed from Betty Boop (cited in Dery, 2006, 82).

Urban vinyl, "designer toys," and "boutique toys" are three of the most common names for a movement blending art, graphic design, and toys to create original items that come from a personal sensibility rather than the direct result of merchandising from television or film spin-offs, comics, or video games. These toys are usually made to be displayed, not played with (Phoenix, 2006, 27).

A toy that would not allow 'toying with' would be a tautology, an anti-climax or a dead-end for a toy designer. A toy that does not allow manipulative interaction is simply a decorative artefact or, on the contrary, a work of high art. Therefore, the assumption is that designer toys are played (or in many cases *dis*-played) with as well, although the play patterns as related to this toy type may not be exactly the same as for traditional dolls, action figures and soft toys. In the words of Vartanian, designer toys are 'essentially toys for kids of all ages that are designed, manufactured, produced or even distributed by the artists and artisans' (Vartanian, 2006, 6).

The designer toy sold at Kidrobot are the centrepieces of a global movement that exemplifies the cutting edge of both pop art and mass culture (See <http://www.kidrobot.com>).

Kudrowitz and Wallace see designer toys as collectibles that are produced in limited editions and are typically made of vinyl or plush. The target audience for designer toys are adults and older teens. Kudrowitz and Wallace claim that these items can be thought of as works of art that resemble action figures, but are not intended for fantasy play. If one happens to play pretend with them, they write, these toys could be viewed as *fantasy toys*. If one is trying to collect a complete set, then the designer toys could be viewed as *a construction or challenge toy*. However, they note that 'designer toys are used mostly as a means of self-expression and a means of creating an image for oneself, similar to a piece of jewelry or a painting' (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008, 7, accentuation mine).⁸⁰ We call these toys designer toys in dereference to the fact that it is the designer (or artist) that is so important to the toy, not the other way around, Budnitz explains. He sees designer toys as true works of art, 'only instead of a flat piece of fabric, the canvas is a three-dimensional sculpture made of plastic, vinyl, plush, or even metal or wood'.

⁸⁰ *Original Empy* – a do/paint it yourself vinyl figure by Lena was launched at the Nuremberg International Toy Fair in 2009. (Spielzeug, 02/2009, 51, also see <http://simm-marketing.com/empy/ueber-empy/>). This was one of the first contemporary European designer toys that I discovered during the research process. Empy imitates, in fact, the famous DIY toy 'Munny'. There are of course other examples as well.



Contemporary toys by Kidrobot at Rotofugi toy store in Chicago, 2012.

According to many, designer toys seemed to have appeared simultaneously in Japan and China (Budnitz, 2006, 6). Dery has more detailed information, as he claims that the designer toy phenomenon begun in Hong Kong in 1999, ‘when Michael Lau turned the underground hobby of “modding” into an art form. The historical roots of the designer toy-trend actually lay in Japan. Japanese aesthetic known as *kawaii/kawaii*, a resolution of the scary (*kowaii*) and the cute (*kawaii*)’ (Dery, 2006, 79).

Indeed, Japanese *manga* (comics) and *kawaii* have strongly influenced the characteristics of the plush designer toys of the recent years. As Allison points out, fantasy is far more valued than realism as the creative aesthetic of popular entertainment in Japan (2006, 47). Takashi Murakami’s projects suggest that it is possible for cute objects to look helpless and aggressive at the same time (Ngai, 2005). This strangeness seems to inspire both toy designers and adult players. According to Murakami, for example, the infantilism underlying the Hello Kitty phenomenon and the whole *kawaii* culture has to do with an impression of Japan’s postwar impotence (Lubow, 2005).

In Japan, the largest consumer group for fantasy characters, such as the Finnish characters of the Moomin series, are 25–40 year old women, who may purchase large amounts of various merchandise related to the character (Ristimäki, 2011, 17).



The toy characters by Monster Factory all have their own personalities., 2013.

Allison writes that ‘the Japanese aesthetic differs somewhat from what people are used to in the western world: In addition to the cuteness of Helly Kitty type characters, there is fascination with monsters (*bakemono*) and other “strange” – supernatural, mysterious, and fantastic – things (*fushigi*)’ (2006, 27). According to Murakami’s theory, the dropping of the war time atomic bombs created a trauma in Japanese culture that influenced the creation of “superflat” visual stories represented as manga (Kelts, 2007, 27). The ‘strange’ has come to inspire many of my interviewees as well, as the interview excerpt from one of the toying artists’ illustrates:

Toys are like a little twisted in the beginning of the 2000. So maybe I’m more interested in how they challenge you more as for classic models for drawing. These twisted toys are something else, you can sort of fix them in the painting itself, they offer freedom of action. Quite gaudy colours and the twistedness, details that may be slightly off, intrigue me. And then, Blythe [doll] and bambi are kind of different models, they are quite perfect. But in my art, I don’t want to make perfect, you have to be able to see the trace of the painting. My painting often is a little bit off track because I find it more interesting to leave something to the viewer, something that sort of irritates. (TA/kt)

Designer toys have also been called 'indie toys'. This refers to the independent status of their designers, who do not have to follow guidelines for 'appropriateness' mostly dictated by the big toy companies. They represent an 'underground subculture, but it's constantly getting exposure to the mass market' (TD/ls). One example of the series of toy characters that begun as a true designer toy, but has since developed into a mass-volume universe of toys and licensed products are the aforementioned Uglydolls. One of the characters is *Deer Ugly*, a toy that wanders around in the photoplay of the author as well:

Deer Ugly lives in the forest where it's nice and quiet. Yeah but deep down, he's thinking: "Please take me home with you!" The nice quiet forest is great, but Deer Ugly wants to see the world... YOUR world! He wants to explore the fantastic places you frequent. Like the room with the desk and computer? What is THAT for? Not much I guess. Please write letters to Deer Ugly. No, not emails. Real letters with real paper! But how would you begin such a letter? Deer Ugly! (Uglydoll press kit, 2009).

According to Cozzarelli, Uglydolls have 'bridged the gap between standard stuffed pal and hip, indie collectible. Some posh trendsetters even use Uglydolls to accent the décor on couches and furniture' (Cozzarelli, 2010). According to Walker, half the people buying Uglydolls are grown-ups who have no intention of passing their cute new companions on to a child (Walker, 2004). To date, there have been over 1 million Uglydolls sold all over the world (Cozzarelli, 2010).

According to Nakamura from Giant Robot (designer toy store in Los Angeles), Uglydolls are self-depreciating, and it's a question whether they really are ugly or not. "They are made and designed well." Most importantly, they hit an emotional chord in people (Mustafa, 2006).⁸¹

Another example of a toy that developed from a (mass-marketed) children's toy into a plaything preferred by adults, is the Blythe doll (originally introduced in 1972 in the U.S.A. by toy company Kenner, now made by Japanese Takara under a license from Hasbro, see e.g. Heljakka, 2011b): Blythe, the contemporary doll that has arisen from

⁸¹ The creators, Kim and Horvath, knew since childhood that they wanted to make toys. They met at Parsons School for Design in New York. Horvath's mother designed toys for Mattel. Horvath and Kim were the first ones to marry indie pop culture and plush. Horvath says that he always wanted to make toys, but knew that he never wanted to work for a toy company. With Kim he shared the vision of making toys that work as storytelling devices (Mustafa, 2006). Other toy designers of today show similar ways of thinking, as the following example illustrates. Instead of promoting a culture of collecting, Tom Wong, a toy designer says: "We want to build up a culture of how to play with toys, not how to buy and sell" (See Lubow, 2004).

a curiosity to a cult-like phenomenon, is loved not only as a special doll, but also because, as an open-ended plaything, it allows its players limitless possibilities in thinking of visual and social play. According to many, the popularity of Blythe stems from the play activities of Gina Garan, who started to photograph the doll in the 1990s. In 2000, Garan published the photographic book *This is Blythe*, which continues to raise interest in the phenomenon around the Blythe doll.

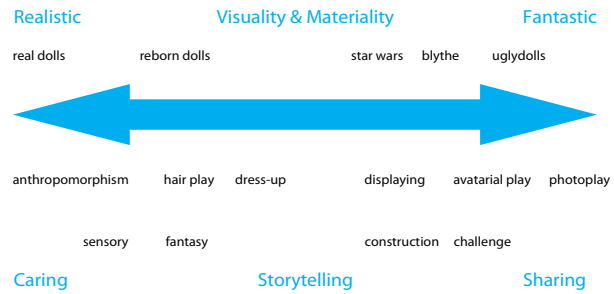
As a 'virtual model', Blythe has amassed fans from leading fashion houses such as John Galliano, Prada, Gucci, Vivienne Westwood, Issey Miyake, Versace and Sonia Rykiel. Fashion designer Alexander McQueen launched a line of clothing with American company Target in 2009 for which Blythe functioned as a mannequin. The now deceased McQueen consulted Gina Garan in the production of print and televised materials. The doll elbowed out human models and strengthened its fan base through this campaign.

Even though Blythe is that perfect – what fascinates me is that it's so very serious. And it's look is terribly appealing. And the original doll was not selling well, that is why they stopped its production in the 70s. Because it was too weird. Weird and cute, a kind of combination. (TA/kt)

The reasons to be a Blythe fan are manifold. The research material allows us to closely examine themes that occur frequently in the statements made by the fans: the 'odd' but surprisingly prevailing visual aesthetic of the 1970s and a certain nostalgic value thereof are appreciated in the Blythe doll, as it is at the same time fashionably renewed in terms of its looks, clothing and attitude. A Finnish example of *designer toys* would be the toys of designed by Eero Aarnio, which are designer toys even in the sense that they are marketed with the designer's name (Rassi, 2012).

Kudrowitz and Wallace propose a concept called 'The Sliding Scales of Play' (2008, 4). The preferences in toys, that are typical in adult forms of ludic engagement, are shown in the graph on the next page. I have organized both the toys and the forms of play according to the idea of Kudrowitz and Wallace.

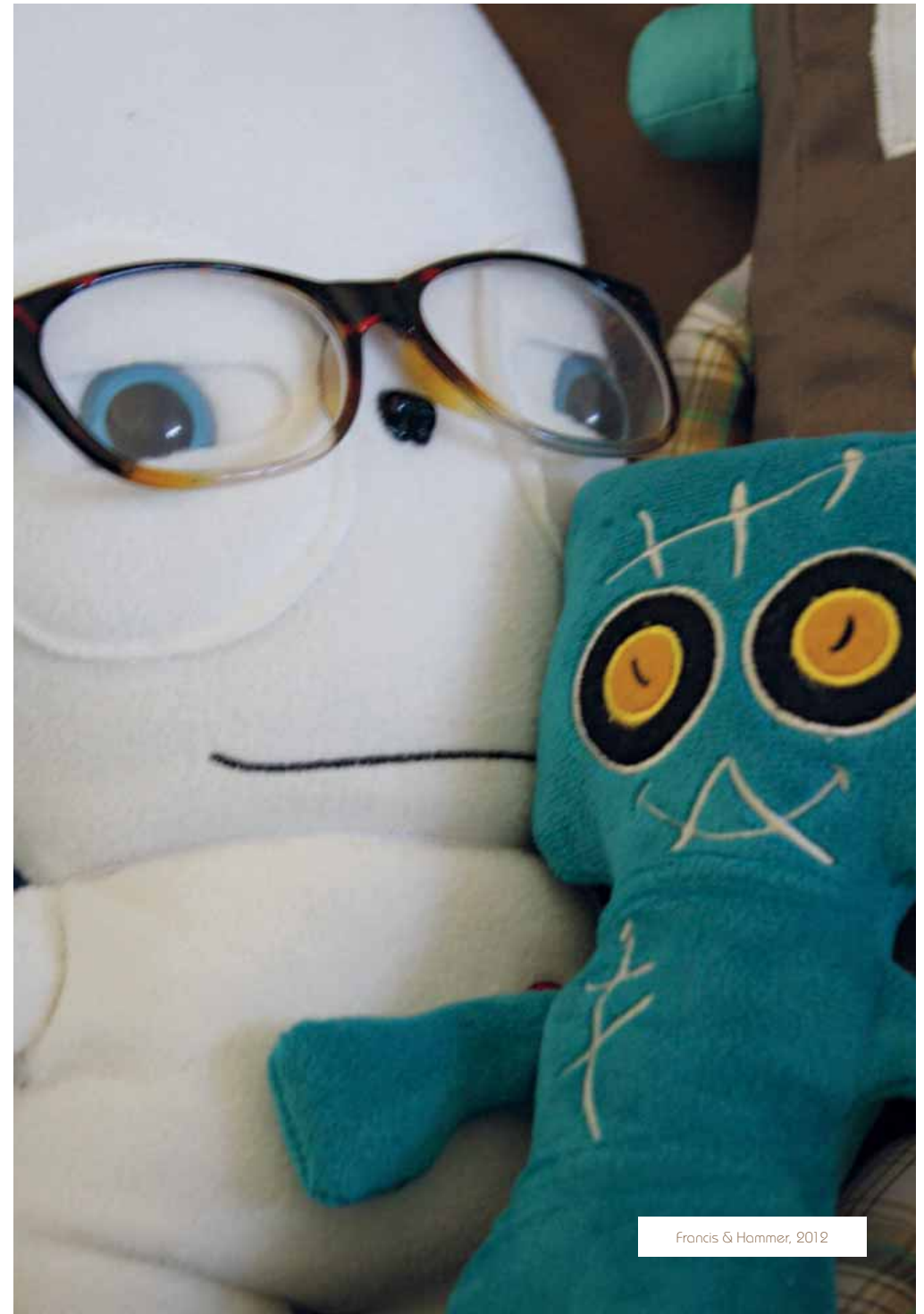
CONTEMPORARY TOYS (examples)



CONTEMPORARY PLAY PATTERNS (examples)

Contemporary toys and contemporary play patterns.

After presenting these examples of contemporary toys, it is time to move on to how the wow of contemporary toys turns to *flow* in play activities. I will go on to discuss possible further affordances of toys in the following chapters, which explore contemporary toys from the perspectives of culture, time, spatiality and identity. These may be seen as additional contexts that need to be addressed in order to understand the totality of the conceptual framework that adult toy play, as a contemporary phenomenon, operates within. Before this, we need to address the activity of play in general terms: The next chapter will elaborate more widely on the phenomenon and activity of play and the understandings of play as a part of human culture. The aim is to lay out an analysis of which motivations and attitudes come to shape how the playing of child and the adult are perceived and how these come to have an effect on the understandings of a toy playing adult.





Flow, 2011

FLOW

The opposite of boredom, in a word, is not pleasure, but excitement.
- Bertrand Russell (1996, 49)

Apparently one of the main reasons people cherish objects in their homes is that they facilitate new flow experiences. (Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981)

TOY: Flows of traffic meet in this object.
(Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1999, 268–269)

Play is viewed as a peak experience. Play involves positive emotions and affect, ecstasy, flow, relaxation and optimism. It involves leisure, as well as solitary activities and extreme games. Players are often avant-garde. (Burghardt, 2005, 9)

The flow experience consists of challenging activity, a merge of action and awareness, clear goals and feedback, concentration, the paradox of control, and loss of self-consciousness and track of time. The flow experience is a highly rewarding state of doing. (Battarbee, 2004, 55)

KH: What do you think a memorable toy experience consists of?

Interviewee: Fun. The most fun, flow, you know Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi, flow. ...
But I don't know, humour. (TD/r)



Free play in Figueres, Spain, 2009.

FLOW: Play, performers and playgrounds

Flow can take place in the actualization of an affordance (Kyttä, 2003, 74).

Captivation is the experience of forgetting one's surroundings and the sense of time while using a product (Arrasvuori et al, 2010, 6).

In *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) Brian Sutton-Smith wrote "The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression. To play is to act out and be wilful, exultant and committed as if one is assured of one's prospects." When exploring the dimensions of contemporary play, one needs to understand one of the most central concepts linked to it, namely the one of *flow*.

The theory of flow, as originally formulated by Hungarian Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has to do with a state of mind that makes us lose track of time and place, and what can be seen as pleasurable even though it sometimes may include challenges as well. As Csikszentmihalyi puts it: 'One soon begins to realize that almost any object or any experience is potentially enjoyable. The task is to find out how this potential can be translated into actuality. If it is true that enjoyment does not depend on scarce resources, the quality of life can be greatly improved' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, x).

When describing flow, Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Beyond boredom and anxiety. The experience of play in work and games* sets artists as examples of people who particularly immerse themselves in their creative work and get enjoyment out of it. He chose to call this peculiar and dynamic state – the holistic feeling that people feel when they act with total involvement as – flow: In the flow state, action follows conscious intervention by the actor. 'He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future. Flow is what can be understood as an 'autotelic experience' (1975, 36). Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that people seek flow primarily for itself, not for the incidental extrinsic rewards that may accrue from it.

Understanding the concept of flow is essential in toy research. Toys and playing with them bring pleasure to people's lives. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 37–38), play in actuality is the flow experience *par excellence*. However, the hobbies of adults furnish voluntary activity like play, which is undertaken chiefly from the pleasure it affords, but often has aims outside the sphere of play (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 248–249). In order to understand adult engagement with toys, one first needs to question what these ulterior aims might be.



Monkeys play fighting on Elephant Island near Mumbai, India, 2011.

Already in the 1920s Walter Benjamin was able to see the risks in only defining a toy as something purely connected with childhood. In his words it would be a great mistake to believe that it is simply children's needs that determine what is to be a toy (Benjamin 2005b, 118). Consequently, in the last part of this chapter, I will move on to discuss two other concepts that cannot be left out when conducting a critical reading on the phenomenon of adult toy play: *Adulthood* and the supposed *infantilization* of culture. The former because of its relevance for how being an adult is perceived in our society from the perspective of playful behaviour with artefacts; the latter in order to explain larger tendencies in our culture that on the one hand see the value and benefits of leisure time activities such as interaction with toys and on the other hand, sometimes even take a hostile standpoint towards these activities because of various reasons. By looking at these sociological issues, I am placing myself as an observer between the two major arguments that can be seen to effect general ideas on adult play; the first seeing it as positive for culture in general, the other a possible threat to society.

As the history of toys briefly presented in the previous part of the thesis shows, adults have always been drawn to toys for various reasons; from the perspectives of design, manufacturing, marketing, guiding and controlling. What the following parts of the thesis will reveal is how the concept of play enters the picture, when adults and toys and the theories of play are discussed (and played against each other) by analyzing contemporary toy objects in cultures of play.

How does a toy enable the actualization of affordances in play which again, result in the experience of flow? This chapter aims at answering this question at least partly: I will look at how theories on play can be utilized when exploring *object play* – the play that happens with toys – specifically. Let us start by first elaborating on the concept of play.

Chapter 5: Conceptions of play

Even eminent scholars have thrown up their hands and considered play more a mystery than a specifiable phenomenon that can be understood through scientific analysis... It exists. Accept it and move on (Burghardt, 2005, xi).

Haim Shafir, toy and game designer, sees play rather as an attitude of the player than an intrinsic quality of the object itself (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). However, in the words of Kline, 'our conception of play has narrowed its scope: The very word 'play' now conjures first and foremost the activities that revolve around the relationship between child and toy' (Kline, 1993, 147). Toys are – by definition – things of play. Thus, these *playthings* could not be explored further without a deeper understanding of play itself. Yet, what needs to be stressed here is that toy play, again, does not equal children's play alone. The study at hand takes a broad perspective on toys and play examining them mostly from an adult point of view. It is crucial for the reader to understand that even though adult toy play presents itself as a novel phenomenon in the context of academic research I cannot fully escape or underestimate the value of previous play theories, although they almost exclusively discuss play with toys with children's motivations and experiences in mind. Therefore, when play is elaborated on by the classic theorists, I will try to keep in mind that some of these theories are more suited for children, whom they mostly concern anyway. In some cases, what has been written about toys and play, applies surprisingly well to adults too. So what the reader will see in the context of this and the subsequent chapters is a constant dialogue between the standpoints addressing toy play as both a pastime and a multifaceted activity of children as well as adults.

However, nearly all literature that exists on toys and play activities in connection with these artefacts, almost exhaustingly points to toys as the playthings of children or alternatively, insist recognizing them as something which in the adult context belong to the interests of the collecting hobbyist. Therefore, in the following subchapter, the reader needs to acknowledge that while I am trying to contest this stagnant view of toy play, I need to take into consideration what has been said about toys before. That almost exclusively points to children's play activities and theorises play from this viewpoint.

Before looking at what has been said about play with toys in particular – in other words, a category of play that the theories of play recognize for example under the term of 'object play' – I suggest that we familiarize ourselves with the classical theories of play.

PLAY: motivations and attitudes

Play

11. a. intr. To engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose; to amuse or divert oneself; to engage in fun, games, or merriment; (formerly also) to frolic, dance (obs.). Now chiefly used of children or young animals (Oxford English Dictionary).

The opposite of play is not a present reality, it is vacillation, or worse it is depression (Sutton-Smith, 1995, 290–291).

As has been stated, the verb “play” belongs first and foremost and traditionally to the realm of children’s play activity in the meaning of e.g. joking, romping, playing house, playing shopkeeper, playing with dolls, lambs, pigs, cars, etc. (Turunen, 1981, 197). The understanding of both play and the tasks and targets of play research have varied according to the different academic realms of research and perspectives. ‘Play is, by definition, a heterogeneous behavior category’ (Dansky, 1983, 72).

It is justifiable to say that we recognize play, when we see it happening. Pet animals at play in homes, monkeys at a zoo or at the sights of exotic travel destinations, young children running around or involved in activities with various things, these are things that easily capture what play is about. At the same time, play is a vast phenomenon that perhaps cannot be captured in a handful of definitions, but many more. However, and in a more relevant sense academically, following Smith’s words: To recognize play we need a definition (Smith, 2010).

“Given its elusive nature, it is unlikely that researchers will ever come up with a satisfactory definition of play” (Power, 2000, 391). As the somewhat pessimistic, yet appropriate quote from Power illustrates, the task at hand is challenging. Articulating a single acceptable definition of play is almost impossible (Chudacoff, 2007, 1).

Brian Sutton-Smith has argued, that a definition of play must be broad rather than narrow (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 218). This chapter attempts to create a framework for understanding the phenomenon of play with a special focus on the forms of play that happen through the use of toys. The chapter is for this reason, not meant to be a thorough review of play research. However, the aim is to give the reader a glimpse of the most central characters and theories on play in order to be able to reflect on how these ideas may go together with the understanding of adult toy play I am aiming to develop in the course of this thesis.

By looking at different attitudes towards play, as provided by various institutions, we quickly understand that there are different accentuations. Let us begin by what the Strong National Museum has to say about the phenomenon:

Play is wriggly. It’s more a process than a thing. Play moves. It’s a cycle of events and mental states. That churns onward and upward across a magical social terrain. Players anticipate pleasant surprises. They enjoy improved skills. Their greater mastery and keener understanding builds strength of mind, body and character. Play leaves us more poised and ready for what comes next (‘Finding play’ by the Strong National Museum of Play).

There are various definitions of what play is because there are various kinds of play. Some have had much more investigation than others, notes Smith (2010, 1). The play of children has been a major topic of study for over a century. Animals play too: Play is widespread among mammals. Well over 90% of all mammals engage in some type of playful behaviour prior to sexual maturity, says Fagen.⁸²

Play is a form of metacommunication that precedes language in evolution because it is also found in animals (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 7). Animals have play-signals that they use when they want to play in general or that express their play mood, and other signals for particular kinds of games (Fagen, 1995, 34). The most well-known examples of social play in mammals are play fighting and chasing, normally with one or more of the same species (Smith, 2010, 45).

Play has also been extremely important in many theories of development, education, therapy, socialization and cognition, writes Burghardt (2005, 66). In an international study discussing the differences and similarities in perspectives on play among early childhood educators in Japan, U.S.A. and Sweden six themes could be detected regarding the means and uses of play: process and learning, source of possibilities, empowerment, creativity, child’s work and fun activities (Izumi-Taylor et al, 2010).

Although importance is given to the benefits of play, it is not a phenomenon that would have been addressed as an adult activity, at least not much until the recent years. Play, an essential component of human experience has been under-studied, claims Marshall (2004, 61).

Marjatta Kalliala notes in a recently published article that many adults are bad at playing, but any adult can talk about play (2012, 6). Birgitta Almqvist ponders that maybe adult activities that fit inside the framework of play are more hidden in their nature than the

⁸² See Fagen, Robert (1981) *Animal Play Behavior*, cited in Siviý, 2010, 298.

ones of children (Almqvist, 1992). Nevertheless, and although recognizing their limited view on adults as players, I want to begin by trying to define play by leaning on ideas presented in the classical theories and theorists of play.

The most influential and enduring older views on human play that are acknowledged even here go back to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, French philosopher Roger Caillois and New Zealand born play scholar (with expertise in psychology, education and folklore) Brian Sutton-Smith. Huizinga and Caillois are probably the most quoted in terms of general writings on play. They are constantly referred to i.e. in (digital) game studies. Sutton-Smith, on the other hand, comes closer to contemporary times in his interdisciplinary analyses of play and thus also offers help in the attempt to grasp the concept of play when focusing on *playthings*.

As Caillois points out, German poet, philosopher, historian and playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) is one of the first to stress the importance of play for the history of culture (Caillois, 1961, 162). Play has universal dimensions, but also culture-specific aspects, says Smith (2010, 95). Schiller writes of the ‘play drive’ (Spieltrieb) as an aesthetic impulse, which allows an individual to experience physical and spiritual freedom through transcending inner and outer constraints (Schiller, 1967). Play and art are born of a surplus of vital energy, not needed by the adult or child for the satisfaction of his immediate needs (Caillois, 1961, 162). We may call everything play which is useless activity, exercise that springs from the physiological impulse to discharge the energy which the exigencies of life have not called out (Santayana, *Sense of Beauty*, 2010, 20).

‘Play is older than culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society’, Huizinga famously states in his book *Homo ludens* (1992, 1, orig. 1938). In Huizinga’s view, people have an impulse to play that cannot be explained by other elements of human society or nature. Huizinga defined play first as a relatively free or voluntary activity in which people set the terms and timing of their own involvement. Second, play is distinguished from routine affairs by its absence of material consequences. Third, play is separated from other activities by its use of rules, spaces, ideas of time, costumes and equipment. Fourth, play both honours rules and yet encourages transgression and disorder. And lastly, fifth, play promotes banding together of participants in “secret” otherwise outlandish societies, writes Henricks (2008, 159).

Roger Caillois is the author of *Man, Play and Games* (1961, orig. *Les jeux et les hommes*, 1958). Scholars widely recognize Caillois’s work as a response to Johan Huizinga’s more famous treatment of play in *Homo Ludens*, notes Henricks (2010, 158, 162). Caillois follows Huizinga in stating that play as free, separate, uncertain, unproductive and governed by rules. Play is also make-believe (Caillois, 1961, 9–10). The various kinds

of play and games are categorized in the following: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilīnx* (vertigo) (1961, x).

Many reasons for the desire to play have been presented: play instinct, surplus energy, practicing for future life, relaxation and imitation of disappeared working acts and rituals (Laaksonen, 1981b, 7). According to Soini (1991, 3), play research as a field of study emerged globally after 1850. It was born out of Darwin’s evolutionary theory which resulted in several theories on play, now considered classics. In the thinking of Soini all other theories than the one of Karl Groos (1899) cannot actually be viewed as theories – rather as attempts to define the origins of play or to define its character. For the ease of reference in the following, I will still point to these viewpoints as theories. Representatives of different disciplines consider play from different viewpoints. A common denominator for the theories of play is that they see play from two perspectives. On one hand the theories see that in play the original connection between work and free self-realization becomes accomplished. On the other hand, the theories say that playing gives the human a chance to free herself from the burdens of every day and work. It seems to be assumed that in play and art a free and autotelic, motivated and intentional activity is reconciled (Karkama, 1981, 19).

English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) wrote in his book *The Principles of Psychology* that play is carried out “for the sake of the immediate gratifications involved, without reference to ulterior benefits” (Smith, 2010, 24–25, orig. Spencer, 623). Play does not include a demand for materialization – a demand to reach some external goal or result. The process of play is in itself meaningful (Hakkarainen, 1991, 28). In other words, playing is an activity that motivates itself (Karkama, 1981, 22).

The primary psychological theorists on play during the period between 1930–1960 are Lev Vygotsky and the Jean Piaget (Smith, 2010, 31–32). According to Swiss Jean Piaget play is a symbolic transposition which subjects things to the child’s activity rules or limitations (Piaget, 1958, 87). Piaget, a cognitive theorist, thus sees play as a facilitative learning process that allows children to engage in new experiences and scenarios, developing both physical and mental skills. When they are playing, says Piaget, children put the reality away (Lillemyr, 1996, 125).

In Piaget’s thinking, when real scenes are reproduced in doll play, imitation is at its maximum (1958, 130). What then, is the function of these mimetic forms of play? According to Piaget, the child is exercising his present life far more than pre-exercising future activities.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) a sociocultural theorist, believed play to be the route to abstract thinking skills that enable control of children’s real-life behaviour. The views of Piaget and Vygotsky differed, writes Smith, ‘as to whether play is primarily

assimilating new experiences to existing schema (Piaget) or showing creativity through being liberated from immediate situation constraints (Vygotsky)' (Smith, 2010, 31–32). In the line of Piaget's thinking, when immersing themselves in the experience of toy play, children put their reality away and transfer to a play world allowing the reflection of dreams and wishes.

According to Smith, both the evolutionary and psychoanalytic traditions of thought did suggest important positive functions of play (2010, 27). Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the Austrian neurologist wrote about a childhood latency period, where play most occurs. According to Smith, Freud thought that play provided children with an avenue for wish fulfilment and mastery of traumatic events. In the thinking of Freud, play first expresses the child's wishes and anxieties. Second, play can help overcome such anxieties, by working through them (ibid.). Thus, in Freudian terms, play has therapeutic value.⁸³

Parten's two academic publications (from 1929 and 1932) outline how young children develop their play activity from solitary play (meaning the child is on his or her own) through parallel play, (refers to one child playing near another child) to associative (means the children are playing together, but doing the same sort of activity by themselves) and co-operative group play a more advanced category of play, as children play together with different roles. Parten also had categories of *unoccupied* and *onlooker* (the child watches others play).⁸⁴

The adult does not have a need to practice for future situations in the same way as a child. The motivations for the play behaviour of adults must be looked for elsewhere. However, the experience of immersion and absorption is nevertheless not unknown in adult toy play either, as we will see in the latter part of the thesis. Hännikäinen says that play is imaginary fulfillment of wishes not yet fulfilled (1991, 102). Further, my hypothesis is that adults play with toys with (at least partly) different motivations. Adult play acts are regulated because of the restrictions in the use of time. Also, adults have an intentional willingness to escape the burdens of everyday life through play. Moreover, play can be therapeutic for adults too, but the reasons for manipulating playthings may have to do more with the desire to create and then socialize through what has been created in the name of play. (We must not forget that a toy's capacity to wow is of importance here.)

⁸³ Rönnerberg suggests (1990, 248) that in play, children process their own powerlessness, subjected position, weakness, smallness, insecurity and overall a feeling of how the great and strong are threatening them. According to Elkind, all children use play therapeutically as a way of dealing with stress (2007, 113).

⁸⁴ See Smith (2010, 37), also see Parten, M. (1932) "Social participation among preschool children", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 27, 243–269.

Most of the stages, as clarified by Parten above, can be seen in adult toy play (as a form of object play) as well, when considering the mimicking of play patterns of other players, for example in doll play. A major difference to children's play here is that adult play activities may take place in both online and offline environments, which makes it more challenging to determine when solitary play turns into associative play, etc.

Play types

Because of its often open-ended and free-form nature, play is easy to recognize, but challenging to define and analyze. In toy research it is essential to understand the playful behaviour of humans and this specifically in terms of object play – manipulation of materials intended especially for the purpose of play. Power (2000) has divided play into five major categories which are: locomotor, solitary object, social object/pretend, play fighting, and parent-child.

The National Institute for Play claims the following classification: Body Play, Object Play, Social Play, Imaginative/Pretend Play, Storytelling Play, Creative Play, Attunement Play. The Consumer Product Safety Commission claims the following classification: Active Play, Manipulative Play, Make-believe Play, Creative Play, Learning Play (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008, 3). Out of these categories, toy play, according to my view, fits best in object play, which can be divided into solitary and social play, into imaginative, pretend and role-play, storytelling play, creative play and so on. Furthermore, I tend to think that playing with objects and in this case toys, always teaches the player something: about the object, about oneself, others and – the world.

Object play

Chudacoff points out that most theories agree on the purposeless quality of children's play (2007, 1). Indeed, according to many, play has no concrete payoffs which means that there is no obvious improvement in the ecological status of the player (Vandenberg, 1983, 115). Play scholar Peter Smith agrees. He says 'if an external goal is present... then the behaviour is not play' (Smith, 2010, 4). Yet, toy play, as a form of *object play* that in itself functions as an umbrella term for the many forms of play behavior, such as social play, pretending, storytelling, creative play and so on, is something in which material is manipulated, perhaps changed and which ultimately results in the improvement of the 'ecological status of the player' as formulated by Vandenberg. In other words, playing with a toy may, as we have seen in the previous parts of the thesis, come to have an effect on e.g. the education of the child.

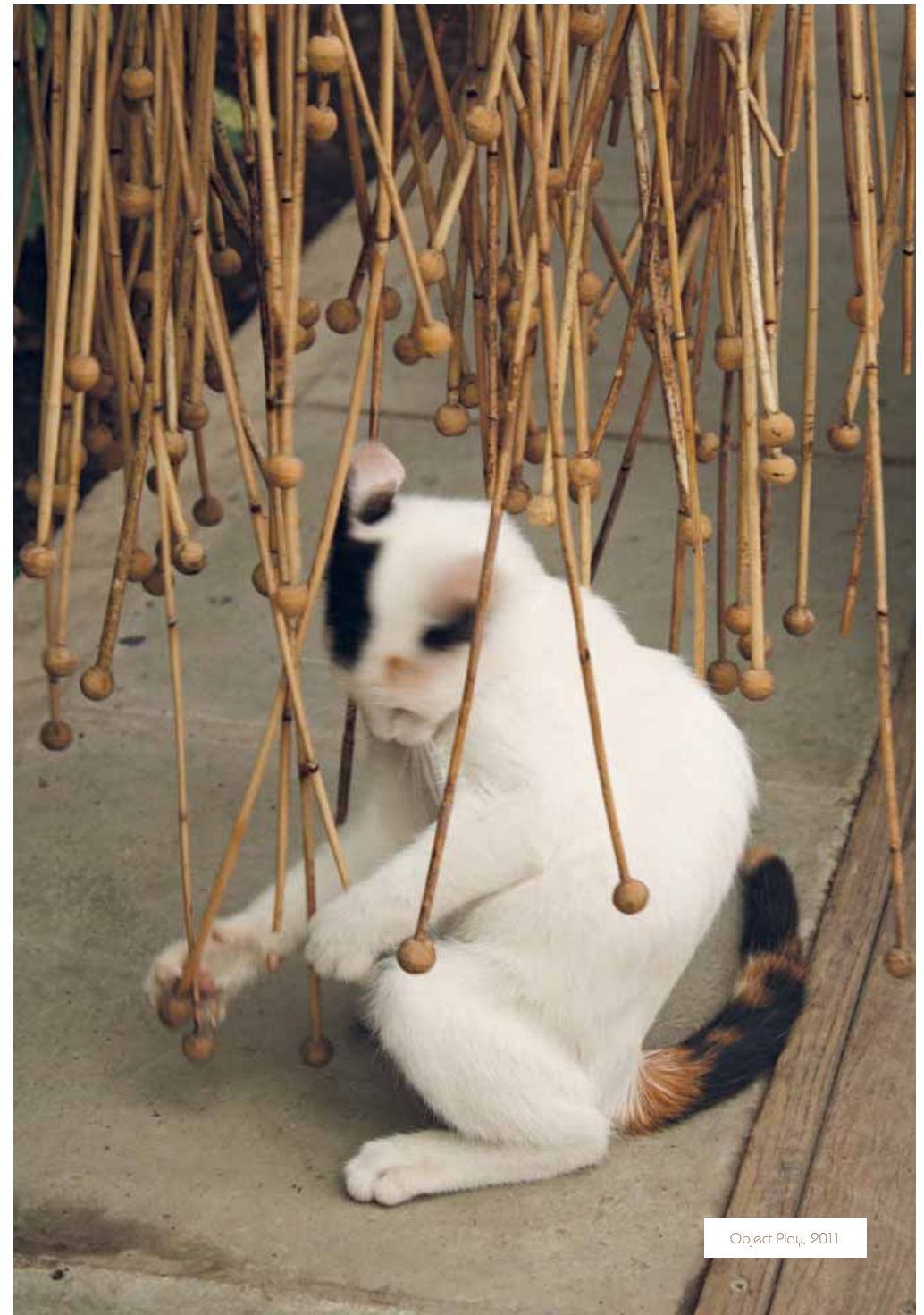
Def: Play is a process of being actively involved and engaging with a thing, an object or a thing, with another person, people or just in self expression, by oneself. Play is a very broad category of activities that includes both animal play, people play and in various settings. It can happen in a home or a school or playground.

According to Smith, object play is particularly prevalent in many primates (2010, 54) while pretend or fantasy play appears more specifically human (2010, 77). As Smith also points out, some object play is seen in the young of predatory mammals – for example kittens grabbing and shaking objects, regardless of whether or not these are potential prey items (2010, 45). Pellegrini and Bjorklund (2004) cite conservative estimates of 10-15% of children's time being spent on object play.⁸⁵

Fantasy or pretend play – engaging in make-believe – is characterized by the nonliteral use of objects, actions, or vocalizations, writes Smith (2010, 9). Hakkarainen claims that the operations of play do not correspond to real operations. For this he gives an example: One does not ride anywhere specific with the hobby horse, one just rides (1991, 36). However, during various activities that the player partakes in play, the hobby horse perhaps comes to change its material being, not to mention the meanings that are developed for it during the play acts.

Power (2000) separates *solitary object play* and *social object play* (Burghardt, 2005, 86). In other words, people can be said to play “with” or “at” the objects and relationships of the world, but they may also be “in” play. Play occurs in many different settings and involves many different kinds of objects. As Henricks reminds, people not only play with one another, they also play with their own bodies and minds, with elements in their physical environment, and even with cultural forms such as ideas, norms, and language (Henricks, 2008, 164). As Smith suggests, the type of object offered to the child may encourage certain types of play (2010, 94). Certainly, this idea applies to adult toy play as well, as depending on the toy type, the object may be manipulated in different ways.

⁸⁵ See Smith, 2010, 133. Also see Pellegrini, A. D. & Bjorklund, D. F. (1997) “The role of recess in children's cognitive performance”, *Educational Psychologist*, 31, 181-187.



Object Play, 2011



A Dora doll on the Nusa Lembongan island near Bali spotted by the author in 2010. The nearby children were involved in what looked like playing house.

Childhood as play-age

Deep meaning lies often in childish play.

- Johann Friedrich Schiller. German poet and philosopher (1759–1805)

KH: One of your exhibitions was called 'Playground'. Tell me about your position towards play?

Interviewee: I told you that it is thought of as something light for children. But it is serious, still. That it is the most important thing the playing, that they should be allowed to do every day. I think it's one of the basic needs. Yes, I think of it, I don't think of it as something light, but I think it's something serious in which the human tries out and tests. And – a relationship to the world. Or to other people, or one's own experiences and because play is a serious thing for me I can compare it with my work – what making art is. And the name – Playground – also depicts the art world. That it is quite a play field which you need to control and act in, in the world of art. (TA/kt)

A thesis on adults (toy play) can paradoxically not only analyze adults, as the whole rhetoric on toy play seem to be so thoroughly grounded upon the thought of children as not only the consumers of toys, but also, as the only category of human beings that engage in playful acts with toys. Most of our fundamental learning is in childhood, and play is an important part of any childhood work, says Jones (2002, 73). In her book *Endangered Minds*, American psychologist Jane Healy writes that children who do not play become nervous and irritated adults.⁸⁶ Adults and toy play cannot be discussed without referring first to childhood and children's play with toys.

As Stop points out, for adults, children's culture is always a foreign one (2011, 22). But as David Kennedy rightly notes, once in our lifetime, we have all been children (Kennedy 2006, 118). Moreover, most literature on toy play refers *only* to children as potential toy players.

Hence, in the framework of this thesis, it seems a justifiable choice to discuss the phenomenon of adult play as something that has its beginnings in childhood. Furthermore, as most literature on a general level concentrates on the play of children, it would not be wise to study adult play from a totally separate viewpoint. Perhaps it becomes more relevant to try to see what connects – and separates – the play of children and adults, when it comes to ludic engagement with toys.

Recognized play theorist Jerome Singer sees the creation of childhood as a phenomenon mastered by the nineteenth century romantics like Goethe and Schiller in Germany who started to become more sensitive to the imaginative components of children's play (1973, 6). We can look on childhood as a social construction, a characteristic of modern society, which evolved in the middle classes in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries (Mouritsen, 1999, 61).

Childhood is celebrated as a time of sensual discoveries and playful experimentation, as an age free from adult demands and responsibilities. And this is in part why childhood becomes the focus of such adult nostalgia (Jenkins, 2007b, 155).

Childhood is a concept that first developed during the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Ariès, 1996). Before this period, notes van Uffelen, children were viewed as 'incomplete adults' (2012, 4). Lee writes of childhood as a social construction and about our tendency to see adults as human beings and children as 'becomings' (Lee, 2001). Today, childhood is seen as a complex and ambiguous matter (ibid.).

⁸⁶ See Healy, Jane M. (1999) *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think And What We Can Do About It*, Simon & Schuster, in Kauhanen 2004.

Nowadays, at least seen through the eyes of a westerner, a childhood not spent in the company of toys could equal an 'incomplete child'. For, in the understanding of many of us, toys have come to equal play, and play again is considered important for our development. Much of the writing on children's play (in the western world) has come from educationists and psychologists. (Smith, 2010) Says Smith, 'the first writings on the importance of play are related to education and may be dated back to Plato, in *The Republic* and *The Laws*' (2010, 21).

Different cultures take different stands towards childhood. Childhood may be seen as a preparatory stage into adulthood. In Finland, a child's 'play age' covers the 14 first years of life (Riihonen, 1991, 138). This shows, how limited a view society of my home country has on the phenomenon of play, and how play age is considered to seize at the age of 14.

Many schools of thought have for a long time agreed on the importance of play, at the same time maintaining that play is education (Bachmann & Hansmann, 1973, 86). Peter Smith argues that the *play ethos* is a strong and unqualified assertion of the functional importance of play (2010, 28). Not all viewpoints stress the developmental and educational value of play, however. For example, Granville Stanley Hall (1844–1924) is responsible for the "recapitulation theory" according to which the function of play is cathartic in nature and allows the "playing out" (Smith, 2010).

Culturally cultivated play refers primarily to urban, middle-class Euro-american families. Such families emphasize individuality and self-expression, and "believe that 'play is a child's work'. *Culturally accepted play* refers to societies where parents typically expect children to play and do not disapprove of it, but neither do they invest much time or energy in supporting it. In non-industrial societies, rural societies, or low-income families, adults do not encourage play. Play is definitely not a concern of the adult in these societies. *Culturally curtailed play* refers to societies where adults will tolerate only minimum amounts of play (Smith, 2010, 91–93). In the U.S.A, says Smith, educators and caretakers are encouraged to play with children and to use play as a means of teaching (2010, 92).

Further, Smith justifiably asks: Does play function for future skills, or for present circumstances? (2010, 26). This question links the ideas about 'free' play with the ones concerning object play, in other words, play that happens with toys. In my idea, free play would cater more logically for the needs of the present and toy play for the skill-building that relates to cognitive development that is important for the future. But play can serve more purposes than just one:

Karl Groos (1861-1946) wrote two major works on play: *The Play of Animals* (1898) and *The Play of Man* (1901). According to Groos play has three different functions; the

one of practicing, the one of fulfilling and the one of refreshment (Groos, 1964, 76 in Karkama, 1981, 18). Groos argued that play provided exercise and the elaboration of skills needed for survival (the "practice" theory of play). Groos stressed the importance of play to child development, identifying it as a process of gaining life skills and as a natural way of spending excess energy. Groos saw play as practice for contemporary activities. Seen in this light, play represents a form of practice for skills necessary for survival, practicing for 'what comes next'.⁸⁷

Adults rule children's culture both as producers and consumers of this culture (Laajarinne, 2011, 33). Childhood is also something that is considered to be under constant stress. According to children's rights as defined by the United Nations, a child has the right to free time and play. According to research carried out by Unicef in Finland, children of today think that playing ends too early in the life of a child. Still, playing is one of a child's most important ways of dealing with both positive and negative issues (Seppälä, 2008). Ombudsman for children's matters in Finland, Maria-Kaisa Aula said in 2009 that children should have more possibilities to play and less to accomplish. Play, in itself, is valuable to a child. One cannot fail in play. Therefore, play should be valued more at homes, in hobbies and even school. One may fail in a game, but play is different. Children today have too many hobbies and too little time for playing (Aula, Maria-Kaisa; Kuluttajavirasto, 2009). (Note that a distinction between hobbying and playing is made here).

For the past years, free, unstructured outdoor play has declined markedly, and it has been replaced to a striking extent by solitary play and adult-supervised activities (*American Journal of Play*, Fall 2010, Interview with Steve Mintz, 145). In negative terms, children's spontaneous active play has been transformed into passive audience participation, claims Elkind (2007, xii).⁸⁸

Children's play is curious exploration and exercise that contributes to their development. As Helenius notes, good playing is challenging; it makes one try harder. At the same time it is easy – a child can compensate parts of what is needed through imagination and by doing so, adjust the requirements to an optimal level (1991, 120). In other words, 'play leads up to from what is easy to more difficult tasks, since only deliberate conquest can produce the feeling of pleasure in success' (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 5). So child's play must also be seen to have creative dimensions. Further, besides the cognitive tasks, children's play also aims at wish fulfillment through the means of fantasy play.

⁸⁷ Lev Vygotski (1984) again attempted to point to that the content of children's play is borrowed from adult culture, but that it is not directly preparation into adulthood and its tasks (Hakkarainen, 1991, 31).

⁸⁸ According to educationalists, in the age of 'smart toys' a child should be exposed to both open-ended imaginative play and the more structured play pattern of a technology toy (Szymanski & Neuborne, 2004, 107).

In sum, for children play caters for the need to adapt the world to themselves and for creating new learning experiences (Elkind, 2007, 3). Also, through their play, children tell us what they are thinking and how they are feeling. If there are problems, their play will reveal them (Auerbach, 2004, 9). Hence, play also has a therapeutic role. To ‘play it out’, says Erikson, is the most natural self-healing measure childhood affords (1973, 215). The immediate benefits for play may be impossible to detect. According to play researcher Reeli Karimäki, play is an activity for which the benefits are realized afterwards (Karimäki; Kuluttajavirasto 2009).



A girl playing hopscotch in Cabo Verde, 2011.

Toy play in childhood

I think it's more natural for children to play. I think everything they do is play. And ... whereas for adults they aren't playing all day, they have to step out of their normal lives. It's a more natural flow for children to get into a game or a toy. (TD/tg)

The activity of play is central in people's relationships with toy objects. Things are experienced. As Dewey explains, ‘we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment’ (1934, 36). Phenomenologically, toys do not exist as objects separated from a playing subject (Rasmussen, 1999, 49). The category of ‘mind or subjective play’ involves according to Brian Sutton-Smith the concept of fantasy (1997, 4). Fantasy, again, is a central element in the toy play of both children and adults.⁸⁹ A child delights in playing with things that can be put in motion, says Groos. ‘We experience an almost irresistible desire to examine closely any strange object and make ourselves acquainted with its properties. Curiosity is the name given to the playful manifestation of attention which results from this tendency’ (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 61, 93). Object play, as in Groos' view, then entails from curious exploration.

...the important thing is playing, and that which is created during play. [...] The important thing in the child-toy relationship is the interaction that is created, for example a sense of experimentation, curiosity, and the resulting level of skill, which gradually increases (Cassotti, 2005).

Toys are the tools for play (Rossie, 1996, 147). It is often the adult who buys toys for the child, and thus knows what kinds of toys the child is playing with. However, what may remain unknown is how the child manipulates the plaything. Indeed, the attractive power of children's play seems at least partly to be based on the fact that it is out of reach for adults, says Lönnqvist (1991, 25).

The notion of a plaything, writes Lönnqvist in 1991, as it is understood in public discourse and western societies, is largely based on an adult view about children, things and children in relation to things. According to Lönnqvist, this viewpoint developed during the golden years of European toy production between 1860–1930, when toys in a truly concrete manner mirrored the ideals of the bourgeoisie (1991, 17).

What is the role of toys in play? Toys are the objects used *voluntarily* for playing (Shafir, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, accentuation my own). According to Jeffrey Goldstein toys stimulate and sustain play, helping children, adults and families to benefit from the many ways in which play improves the quality of life (*Toys, Play and Human Development*, 2009). Smith elaborates that ‘it is certainly plausible that object and pretend play give useful and enjoyable experiences in which many skills can be acquired’ (2010, 99).

⁸⁹ However, not all play scholars are convinced that fantasy play is maintained in current times: Elkind takes a critical stance to the toys of today by saying that children come to see them as vehicles of social acceptance rather than launching pads to imagination and fantasy (Elkind, 2007, 17).

Still, as Burghardt argues, play has been idealized by toy companies in order to sell 'expensive toys to nervous parents rather than their children' (Burghardt, 2005, 7).

The commerciality of playthings is seen as one of the possible threats. There is an enormous pressure at children from the side of commercial children's culture: toys, fashion articles, comics, a culture of selling that Ben Goulart characterizes as "an attack on childhood" (1969 in Virtanen, 1981, 75).

Chudacoff claims that American culture has in fact, linked toys so closely with childhood that in the minds of many people toys define play itself (2007, 216). Still, Nelson and Svensson point out that play research is far more developed than research on toys (2005, 9). For example, social scientists have not paid much attention to toys either. 'In their hundreds of thousands of research studies over the past fifty years on children, they have devoted very few to toys as such', writes Sutton-Smith (1986, 9). One reason for this may be what Birgitta Almqvist notes. She says that attitudes to play have swung between positive and negative for centuries, and have always depended on people's ideas about the role of the child in society (1992, 248). However, studies on play provide important information about social and cultural activities in relation to how toys come to be in existence, how they are developed, and most importantly – played with.

There are cultural differences as different countries may have different attitudes toward certain toys and the values attached to them. For example in Finland, toys are projected with moral questions and threats from which children are attempted to kept safe. Each toy brings its own questions forward. Particularly a popular toy type of the past years, the Bratz dolls, crystallize a threat towards childhood with the messages they convey and connect to adult entertainment. Glitz and glam, disproportionate bodily dimensions and a naughty girl image are manifested in a new age fashion doll such as the Bratz. But toys in themselves do not do anything to children, they only direct them to a certain kind of play performance. Adults' comprehension of what children do with toys are often unidirectional. Children play with contemporary dolls, such as Bratz in a multitude of ways: On the one hand, reality TV such as Top Model may be repeated in play, but on the other hand, the doll may find its way into the bath. A TV series may be seen to support play (TR/mrI), and not limit it.

In Ruckenstein's idea the contemporary toy includes a powerful invitation that children present to each other: "Play with me!" Toys are used in building relationships – they remind children of other children and toys are also borrowed to peers. Parents (as adults) are much more considerate in questions of ownership, also when concerning toys.

A toy is often a gift from the adult to the child, but the child may experience the gift in a different way to its giver. The child might even give the toy to one of her friends. Children are extremely particular in their choice of toys, which Ruckenstein sees as a result of their social lives – the daily communication with other children (TR/mrII).

As the European Directive (still) states the toy must still be 'clearly intended for children. To meet the Directive's (juridical) definition of a toy, the product/material must be designed or clearly intended for: 1) use in play 2) children under 14 years. A product that is classified as a toy under the EU's Toy Safety Directive is CE marked and must meet certain safety requirements.⁹⁰

The toy play of young children is largely about manipulation of objects. A child that plays close to another child (parallel play) does not mind the other child so much. As children grow older, they will agree on roles, make plans about a plot which ultimately connects the play events to one another (Hakkarainen, 1991, 49). Olivia Saracho writes of toys as tools that assist children in assuming various roles, by helping supplying them with information and help them understand the dynamics of social life surrounding them (1991, 97). Therefore, when analysing the development of play, just like other forms of human activities, we need to analyse it on two levels; on an individual and on a social level (Hännikäinen, 1991, 110).

Each child's personality and environment may lead to unique interpretations of a particular toy regardless of the intentions of the manufacturer or the opinions held by adults (Ferris Motz, 1992, 223). Consequently, children play differently with different toy types (Jenvey, 1996, 107).

Age, sex, social class, access to time, and other characteristics affect the preferences, style, and quality of play, says Chudacoff (2007, 2). In the beginning girls and boys start with similar play patterns, as Benezra and Hogan note:

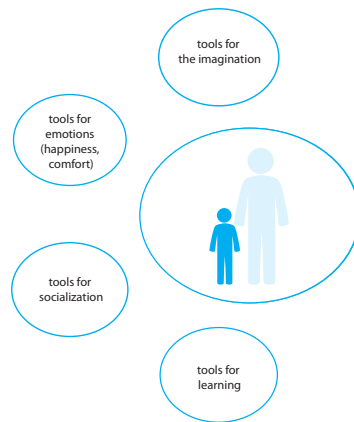
2- and 3-year-olds both enjoying dolls, trucks and kitchens. "If there's a gender difference then it hasn't been wired in yet," said Shelley Pazer, a psychologist and youth marketing consultant at the Discovery Group, N.Y. But at age 4 something changes; boys opt for fast, action-oriented toys, while girls gravitate to nurturing and role play, i.e., dolls and dress-up. As they grow older, girls prefer reality-based toys and activities that deal more with their appearance, environment and socializing with friends. Boys, who tend to be more insular, look to video games, sports and superheroes (Benezra & Hogan, 1995).

⁹⁰ Source: TIE, Toy Industries of Europe. Note here paragraph 2 'children under 14 years'.

The play situation of children can begin by solving practical matters: In organizing play children need to decide how to solve the following tasks: 1. What playing is about, 2. Who participates in play, 3. What is going to be the content of play, 4. How playthings and other props needed in play are allocated, 5. How the plot and rules of the game are taken into consideration, 6. How possible disputes are solved, 7. How the quality of the playing process is assessed and 8. How the characteristics of fellow players are assessed (Hakkarainen, 1991, 52).

In my opinion, these stages may be present in the process of playing out different scenarios, but they may emerge in a much more unstructured fashion. To me what happens in adult toy play is largely based on intuitive decisions – made in a flow state of mind – throughout the process and not necessarily in the order that Hakkarainen describes. Again, if there are material outcomes of play such as a documentation of the spatial order of toys, as will be clarified in the analysis of adult play patterns (which rarely happens in children’s play but perhaps more often as a result of adult play activities) makes it easier for a researcher to analyse play patterns and possible plots. Given that we can identify (children’s) toy play when it occurs, the next task is to compare this activity to the play patterns of the toy playing adult.

TOYS AS MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCED OBJECTS (children)



Toys as meaningful objects for children.



The toy playing adult and infantilization of culture

We don't stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.
- C. Wyatt Runyon

A creature that once knows the pleasure of play will derive satisfaction from it even when youth is gone.

- Karl Groos, *The Play of Animals* (1898, 81)

A traditional view on play regards it as socialization that prepares the child for the role of the adult (Hakkarainen, 1991, 30). It may be that play is a vital or essential part of the development of a healthy and successful adult as well, notes Peter Smith (2010, 68). Burghardt's thinking follows similar paths as he says that 'it has long been known that play can be therapeutic for adult humans' (Burghardt, 2005, 38). However, he claims that 'many theories about play, and even the way we define play, reflect the needs of adults in

organizing and controlling children, rather than the actualities in children's behaviour' (Smith, 2010). The lack of studies and literature on adult play may communicate this very same idea, but in the opposite way: By leaving adults aside of the exploration of play as a phenomenon, we come to control the sphere of play and refuse the entrance to this realm of human life for those who, according to the ideas of the society, should *not* be playing.

For adults play feels frivolous. (TD/bb)

The word *play* argues Gray, has some negative connotations to people in our culture, especially when applied to adults. 'It suggests something trivial, a diversion from work and responsibility. It suggests childishness' (2009, 479). Yet, as Fleming rightly believes; 'we have to recognise that it is not just the kids who are at it' (1996, 195). According to Soini (1991, 6) Finnish play researcher Yrjö Hirn was not interested in playing only as an activity of children, but first and foremost as an activity of the human following the thoughts of Huizinga. In Hirn's thinking, play is art that has not been realized yet, something that has a clear connection with mature artistic activity and that does not lack general aesthetic interest.

It is not proper to be ashamed of any game. This is no child's play. It is wrong for adults to say - and for the more intelligent of the children to repeat after them 'Such a big boy and he plays like a baby; such a big girl and she still plays with dolls.' What matters is not what one plays with, but rather how and what one thinks and feels while playing. One can play wisely with a doll or play childishly and foolishly at chess (Janusz Korczak, *Rules of Life, A Childhood in Dignity*, 1930).

'We must keep in mind, that not all classic theories of play keep the child in focus, when analyzing play', says Henricks. For example, Huizinga did not emphasize individual play or the play of children in his accounts (Henricks, 2006, 216). Each culture sees play in a distinct way, and it must be remembered that the reaction of adults to play also varies.⁹¹ Some characteristics of children's play are in adult life preserved in art, sports and learning of adults, says Hakkarainen (1991, 28).

⁹¹ See Yumi Gosso in the passage on 'Play in different cultures' in Smith, 2010, 80.

Yet the possibility of seeing adults to play for other reasons, like the joy that toy play appears to generate for all ages, seems to be a subject of study that is somehow forgotten, foreseen or passed up by previous researchers.⁹²

Nevertheless, as has been stated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, in the age of the ludic turn, interest towards play in its various forms is rising. Play changes with the age of the individual, but it never ceases to exist. As Pauli and Colombo (2005) point out, play should not be associated with just the period of infancy. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the mass-produced toy would not exist without the play(fulness) of the adult. To learn more about the adult perspective of play means that the discussion about play has expanded, notes Sandberg (2003, 89). Few studies of adult playfulness exist, but limited research on older adults and playfulness suggests that playfulness in later life improves the cognitive, emotional, social and psychological functions and healthy aging overall (Yarnal & Quian, 2011, 52).

Playfulness

People are looking for excuses to be playful. (TD/dk)

Play as a phenomenon can be captured and defined in many ways perhaps first and foremost just because of its multidimensional and playful nature. The *playful* again, is the modern way we idealize play (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 148). A distinction has to be made here. As Danet says, 'too often, the myriad theories of play that have circulated in the 20th century and earlier have not distinguished between play and playfulness' (Danet, 2001, 45). For example the PQ, or the Play Quotient, which is a tool for measuring "the extent of the ability of the child (or adult) to be playful and to play" (Auerbach, 2009, 24), does not make a difference between 'to be playful' and 'to play', which in my thinking need to be looked at as separate concepts.⁹³

⁹² Toy play among 'tweens', has, however, gained some interest from researchers. 'Tween' is a person not yet in her teenage years, but according to my understanding, a pre-teen aged 9–12 years. According to a study made in 2003 by C&R Research and their KidzEyes division (the first comprehensive Tween State study in the U.S.A. in which the objective was to find out from children about their attitudes towards the supposed KGOY phenomenon). According to the study, most tweens play with toys and over 40 percent play with toys for more than an hour each day. The children said that they they valued unstructured play in addition to toys, sports and video games (Kurnit, 2009).

⁹³ For example, in the realm of design, user co-creation or participatory design the playful experience does not necessary mean that the participation happens by playing. Instead, it may be regarded as an attitude or a state of mind that helps us to see things differently or achieve unexpected results (Norman, 2010).

As we have seen, both the play of children and adults can manifest themselves in numerous ways. Because there is resistance from some to recognize that adults play, another possibility to address the activity is to refer to playfulness. Although I am convinced that what adults do with toys really is play, it needs to be recognized here that not all understand this form of ludic engagement with toys as *actual* play. In some cases, the play at adult age is spoken of in terms of ‘adult playfulness’.

One way of underlining the close relationship between play and games is to pay attention to the playful attitude of the (game) player (Rijoranta, 2010, 73).

‘Playfulness’ is a much more common term than play itself in adult media contexts such as interior and lifestyle magazines, in which play as a term comes to mean a certain whimsy or a leisurely take on life, not play as in its traditional meaning i.e. related to toys or games. For example, the Hamptons may be pointed to as an environment, ‘where the jet set goes to play’ like in a fashion magazine.⁹⁴ Amusement parks, on the other hand, represent environments where adults are let to express their playful side by revealing their ‘inner kid’.

Sutton-Smith sees playful behaviour to include putting something into play, bringing into play... being played out (1997, 4). Of course, when an adult engages with a toy, s/he is putting it to play in one form or another. However, it needs to be stressed that to me, playfulness is even more an *attitude* and a *state of mind* than actual play, because whereas play is a process that may develop the capacities of the player (and the playthings), playfulness remains a way of thinking that does not refer to manipulation of materials on a more concrete level. This idea follows how Arrasvuori et al (2010) see playfulness as a state of mind of the user, or an approach to an activity.

Guitard et al note that previous studies have confirmed that playfulness is present in adulthood but do not provide information on its specific nature (Guitard et al, 2005). However, descriptions of playfulness have been made by many different scholars. Csikszentmihalyi (1981, 24) asserted that playfulness “is not an expendable luxury. It is the stuff of life, it is what gives us the experience of freedom, of transcendence, of growth”. Barnett (2007) has conceptualized young-adult playfulness as a predisposition to transform situations in novel, flexible, creative, and humorous ways (Yarnal & Quian, 2011, 52).

⁹⁴ See e.g. *VILANotes*, Summer 2012, 30, text: Julia Lahme.

Martin Pichlmair (2008) refers to playfulness as “an attitude manifesting in the experience of approaching these limits, or explore them”. The features of the playful emotional state are lightness, joy and flow (Vorderer & Chan, 2006, 354). Playful involves improvisation, inventiveness, and creativity. It is joyful (*American Journal of Play*, Fall 2010, Interview with Steve Mintz, 156). Like playful children, playful adolescents are physically animated, socially engaged, mentally spontaneous, emotionally fluid, and humorous (Yarnal & Quian, 2011, 56–57).

In her Master’s thesis on service design for playful mobile social media, Pei-Chun Chen detected and defined the following proposals for playful behaviour among young adults: Theme play, storytelling, association, nonsense, togetherness, personalization, paradox, augmented situation, hidden surprise, sensation, experimentation, empathy, eye-catching, persuasion, drama, liveliness, or newness, openness, killing time, out of reality, self-expression, meaning play (Chen, 2010).

According to Guitard et al, playfulness in children varies among authors. Only pleasure and spontaneity are unanimously attributed to playfulness. Curiosity, sense of humor, and imagination are also frequently identified as components of playfulness. According to our results, playfulness in adults is composed of creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity. Thus, the components of playfulness appear to be the same in adults as in children with the exception of creativity and imagination (Guitard et al, 2005).

Barber claims that ‘children may be said to be playful (playfulness without purpose), young adults earnest (purposefulness without play), while fully mature adults can achieve that disciplining of playfulness by purpose that we associate with artistry’ (2007, 85). Furthermore, as stated by Yarnal and Quian, playful older adults are primed to initiate something novel, unexpected or quirky. ‘...playful adults are amusing: they are observably funny and humorous, which, in turn, solicits positive responses from others’ (Yarnal and Quian, 2011, 72–73, also see Östman, 2009).

The benefits of ‘playfulness’ and a (humorous) playful attitude are thus recognized. Auerbach writes that playful people are less stressed, more inquisitive, more open to new experiences, more creative, and share their enthusiasm for play with their siblings, friends, and family. They explore all of the possibilities available and are eager for more play experiences (Auerbach, 2004, 237).



Fair-goers admiring a Märklin train miniature world at Nuremberg International Toy Fair, 2012.

In other words, playfulness may result in play, which may again result in further play activities. But playfulness on the other hand, may not equal play. As we have discovered, play and playfulness need to be addressed as separate concepts. Although playfulness goes together with play, these two terms still describe different aspects of a larger phenomenon.

Being playful can be an underlying attitude that makes an adult more open to the possibility of engagement with toys, but playfulness may relate to many other areas of life as compared to ludic interaction with playthings in particular.

Let us now return to the concept of play, as this is what the remainder of the thesis will concentrate on. The main contending theories described here do (although in a quite marginal manner) acknowledge the possibility of play at adult age, but do not specify the various actions related to this behaviour. Before exploring the toy play activities of adults as a specific phenomenon within the broader sphere of play culture, we will study in more detail what makes it possible to distinguish the toy playing adult from the toy playing child. Two major concepts, as presented in the following, will guide this discussion.

At adult age, play is a state of mind, rather than an activity, claims Stuart Brown (2009, 60). In my view, it can be both things. Adults in general have not been considered as a toy playing audience, except from the perspective of collecting.

The industry may, however, have started to see the possibilities that older age groups as target audiences would mean in terms of potential buyers. One of the central themes at the Nuremberg International Toy Fair in year 2012 addressed the teenager audience as potential toy players. A quote from a brochure describing the study underlines the attitude to consider older players illustrates that things might be changing:

A study of teenagers as a target group for the toy market? It was high time! (Toys 4 Teens leaflet, 3) On behalf of Spiewarenmesse eG, the market research company iconkids & youth international research GmbH carried out a representative study, headed by Axel Dammler, that examined the play and purchasing behaviour of young people. In October 2011, 500 teenagers between 13 and 17 were interviewed face-to-face across the whole of Germany (Toys 4 Teens leaflet, 4).

So perhaps interest is slowly (and rightfully) turning from children to other demographic groups as well. Finnish academic and journalist Erkki Kauhanen (2004) asks in his article on play, whether or not adult play becomes more important as the play of children decreases. He continues to ponder upon the possibility that the austerity of working life might be one reason for increased interest in play at adult age. The aim of the next part of the chapter is hence to address adults at play specifically.

The four studies conducted by Anette Sandberg in Sweden for her doctoral thesis about adult experiences of play, show that adults do play in different ways. 'They play with their own and other people's children, they play at work, in nature and in restaurants' (Sandberg, 2003). In Sandberg's study the possibility for adults to play with toys is not, however, specified as a theme. Nevertheless, as has been stated before, adults may have their own forms of play for different occasions (Turunen, 1981, 197).

According to Sutton-Smith, there is evidence that complexity in play highly correlates with age (1997, 42). I would like to note here that the complexity of play acts at adult age is dependent on who (and with what) the adult is playing with. This also applies to play with toys.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Many toy companies understand that the adult may be a potential customer for a plaything. However, what is perhaps far less recognized is the possibility that the adult would actually play with the toy. An example from the Monster Factory catalogue follows: "Who buys monsters? - One of the best things about this brand is its ability to cross demographics and reach a wide range of fans. Kids want monsters to sleep with at night, adults want to put them on their desks at work, and everyone seems to want to collect them". As I see it (and will discuss later in the thesis), collecting is a form of play, as is the displaying toys. In sum, to see adults as possible buyers and consumers of toys should also be about seeing them as *players* (See Monster Factory catalogue 2013).

Brian Sutton-Smith is one of the play scholars that has deliberately explored adult play as an activity. He notes by listing the rhetorics in connection with that, that ‘the rhetoric of the self’ is usually applied to solitary activities like hobbies. ‘Hobbies are forms of play in which play is idealized attention to the desirable experiences of the players – their fun, their relaxation, their escape – and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances’ (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 11).

Hakkarainen argues that an adult may use play as a conscious means to develop other activities or herself (1991, 31), an idea that was earlier proposed by Groos: ‘The hobbies of adults furnish voluntary activity like play, which is undertaken chiefly from the pleasure it affords, but often has aims outside the sphere of play’ (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 248–249).

It is clear then, that to hobby also means to play. Yet, by addressing adult play only as ‘hobbying’ does not accentuate the various nuances of the activity, especially when considering toys and play patterns related to these artefacts. To this day toys have been far too commonly regarded as objects created solely for children, if not as the things for play only for them. With play it is the other way around: Play has been thought about altogether too exclusively from the point of view of adults, and has been regarded too much as the imitation of adults (Benjamin, 2005b, 119). The next question that will be considered is the one concerning the supposed infantilization of culture as a possible reason for the prevailing understanding of the adult as a toy owner (and hobbyist!) and at the same time the ‘impossibility’ of seeing the adult as an actual toy player.

Infantilization

“Why do we have to grow up?”
- Walt Disney

Be that as it may, for the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during “free time” (Huizinga, 1992, 8).

In adulthood, games, sports, and perhaps entertainment more generally, seem to be extensions of the play of early childhood (Oatley et al, 2006, 214). To the working adult, play is seen as a form of recreation.

In the words of Erikson, ‘it permits a periodical stepping out from those forms of defined limitation which are his social reality’ (1973, 205). This view is supported by one of my interviewees in the following way:

[Adult play] it’s a way to stop thinking about your work or whatever, really to disengage. Do something that doesn’t have any connection to what might be burdens on your life. (TD/tg)

KH: How do you think adults use toy objects?

Interviewee: That’s a good question. Stress release. Like stress release, a way to engage with people that you might not engage with normally or people that you might want to [...] It’s a totally different engaging and fun experience, a different kind of sharing on that level but I think relaxation and communication. (TD/tg)



Childish behaviour such as free (and aimless) play is often not tolerated at adult age. ‘Play is superfluous’ as Huizinga himself says. Yet adults of today can dress in popular ‘one-pieces’ (Salo 2011), and it is according to many just a fun dimension of fashion. In my thinking, at the same time, the one-piece (see image on the left) is a wonderful symbol of how children’s (or more accurately, infant) culture comes together with the adult world. It single-handedly stands for a development in the world of today, where children’s and adult’s cultures blend in perceivable ways and can be discussed in terms of humour. Rites of passage from one realm to the other may not be as clear as in earlier societies, but the requirement of behaving like a child (‘the becoming’), or an adult (‘the being’, see Lee, 2001) still prevails. Anything that falls in between is considered suspicious, not unlike the toy playing adult, who in his or her

activity comes to show a preference for artefacts that society mostly considers as something belonging first and foremost in childhood.

According to research carried out by Unicef in Finland, children of today think that playing ends too early in the life of a child. Still, playing is one of a child’s most important ways of dealing with both positive and negative issues (Seppälä, 2008). Unfortunately, says Terr, people today devalue their play. ‘We tend to play less and less, the older we become’ (1999, 25). As seen, regardless of toy play as a phenomenon that does not restrict itself to children, studies on play have mainly concentrated on forms of

play that are carried out in childhood. As van Leeuwen and Westwood (2008, 153) justifiably point out, ludic engagement at adult age has been almost exclusively studied in a therapeutic context. They ask: “If play is a preparation for maturity (Groos 1901) then what are the mature doing when they play? Are they preparing for death? Perhaps they are not preparing for anything” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 47). Play at adult age is in some ways for the most part connected with feelings of guilt and is therefore something less natural than play in childhood. Guilt is discussed in one of my interviews as well:

I don't think that children have any feelings of it as guilty pleasure like that, they should be doing that, it's like their job, versus adults that's like a lot different, work and play, they feel probably just like "I'm goofing off" or something. (TD/bb)

I think [to play] it's mostly to find a spot in themselves, a spot that is childlike, open. (TD/dk)

As Morace (2005) points out the phenomenon of the *Forever Kids* reported some time ago by the Future Concept Lab. ‘The trend can for example be exemplified by the growing success of cartoon books and films for adults, with the remarkable success of cartoon characters’. Forever Kids connects with the Kidult phenomenon and the so-called Peter Pan Syndrome. J. M. Barrie’s character Peter Pan famously stated: “I don’t want to be a man, I want always to be a little boy and to have fun” (Barber, 2007, 19).⁹⁶ Fun, inevitably, is what the entertainment culture provides us with today. Historically, notes Jenkins, ‘the circus used to pitch itself to “children of all ages,” as if the experience of entertainment represented a return to the pleasures of childhood’ (Jenkins, 2007b, 155). In the thinking of Schlyter, adults often have an insatiable need for play (1976). Compared to many animals, we humans are neoteneous. In other words, we retain the juvenile ability to play (Interview with Stuart Brown in *American Journal of Play*, Spring 2009, 405). Groos notes that adult play may result from other things besides surplus energy, namely the need for recreation (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 226). According to many, especially in terms of thinking of the sociologists, having too much fun and playing excessively, or for a too long a period in one’s life, is unacceptable:

⁹⁶ Peter Pan is a fictional character created by author J. M. Barrie in the early 1900s. He is a boy who never wants to grow up, flying off to Never Never Land and embarking on a variety of adventures. He has captured the imagination of many subsequent generations, appearing in a number of books and dramatic pieces such as plays (See <http://www.wisageek.com/what-is-peter-pan-syndrome.htm> cited 2.2.2012).

Michael Bywater claims in his book *Big Babies Or: Why Can't We Just grow Up?* about the current state of affairs in which contemporary adults suffer from a ‘postmodern, infantilized condition’ (2008, 66). Bywater writes of growing up as a process that should in today’s world view be prolonged as much as possible – because reaching maturity is a predecessor of death (2008, 197).⁹⁷ Cross calls the infantilized male the ‘boy-man’:

Everywhere I turn today I see men who refuse to grow up- husbands of thirty-five who enjoy playing the same video games that obsess twelve-year olds; boyfriends who will not commit to marriage or family; and fathers who fight the umpires or coaches at their son's little league games. [...] Many are frustrated and confused about what maturity is and whether they can or want to achieve it. I call them boy-men (Cross, 2008, 1).

According to cultural critic Neil Postman, when kids and grownups share a common culture through TV, movies and the Internet, the enchantment that childhood once held disappears. ‘Postmodern culture is propelling us back into the Middle Ages, where kids were preconscious and adults childlike’ (Cross, 2004, 12).

Neil Postman claims that the media is to blame: ‘television drama presents images of children as ‘adultified’ and precocious while the adult characters are infantilized and immature’.⁹⁸ What Postman accused TV for, was in more broad terms shattering the privacy of the home (Lee, 2001, 74–75).

Robert Bly asks why at the close of the twentieth century adults have regressed toward adolescence while adolescents refuse to become adults. He asks: ‘Where have all the grown-ups gone?’ I find this a fascinating question having followed the toy trends and playing patterns of adults for the past few years. According to Philippe Ariès, adolescence has become the ‘favourite age’ (1996, 28). But again, reminds Lee, standard adulthood has also eroded (Lee, 2001, 128).

In his philosophical review on infantilization of culture, Bly says that adults seem to lack the vertical approach in their thinking about tradition, religion and devotion. This seems to have an effect especially on young men. An explanation could represent itself in the fact that there are no effective rituals on initiation, and no real way of knowing

⁹⁷ Popular culture plays with the very same theme in two recent movies, namely ‘TED’ (2012) and ‘Lars and The Real Girl’ (2007). Both films tell stories of adult men who have become attached to toys, in the first case a teddy bear with obnoxious manners kept from childhood years, in the latter, a Real Doll that the lead player acquires and hosts as a companion (an imaginary friend but with physical dimensions) at adult age.

⁹⁸ See Kline, 1993, 71. Also see Neil Postman (1994) *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Random House.

when our slow progress toward adulthood has reached its goal, so the young men in our culture go round in circles. ‘Observers describe many contemporaries as “children with children of their own”’ (Bly, 1996, 44).

According to Gary Cross, adult men want to immerse themselves in an adventure which is all about never-ending play (2008, 5).⁹⁹ This ethos of *infantilization* has worked to sustain consumer capitalism (Barber, 2007, 4). Issues such as age compression and infantilization/‘forever kids’ continue to puzzle both the toy industry and sociologists. According to Bywater, in the age of ‘big babies’ we are not living life but looking at it. ‘We are not playing but looking at others playing’. Barber claims further that current consumerism urges us to retrieve the childish things ‘and to enter into the new world of electronic toys, games, and gadgets that constitute a modern digital playground for adults who, the market seems to have concluded, no longer have to grow up’ (Barber, 2007, 14). This is where the connection to my research – as a study of the toy playing adult – becomes particularly interesting.

Toy design teacher Rémi Leclerc discusses the ‘Peter Pan’ phenomenon in relation to toy culture and adult toy use (2008). An article in *Science Daily*, the Peter Pan phenomenon is explained as follows: ‘an increasingly larger number of adults are presenting emotionally immature behaviors in western society. They are unable to grow up and take on adult responsibilities, and even dress up and enjoy themselves as teenagers when they are over 30 years old’. Bly sees the infantilization of culture even to have an affect on artistic work, which becomes more and more eclectic, not stemming from the authentic. In his sharp but intelligible notion, Bly says that the role of fantasy is growing and does not see this to have only positive outcomes: ‘Disney studios will provide fantasy deer, video games will provide fantasy death, and the Internet will provide fantasy friendship or fantasy sex’ (1996, 82).¹⁰⁰ Toys seem to provide a suitable avenue for artistic and designerly work, but it would not be rightful to limit one’s thinking to the rather negative assumptions regarding the infantilization of culture as the only outcome of this development.

⁹⁹ The ‘Kidult’ theme was accentuated at the Hong Kong International Toy Fair in January 2013 which concentrated mainly on toy categories that have been seen as male-oriented: action figures, scale models and magic tricks were chosen to represent what kidults are mainly playing with.

¹⁰⁰ The infantilization as seen in these sources is mainly addressed as a concern that has to do with males. Seen from the perspective of toy play, on the other hand, adult toy players represent both gender. When the benefits of play are more generally discussed in media, there is no particular accentuation on either gender. For example, an organizer of adult activity camps says: ‘Playing [in groups] is a good way of getting to know people and to relax. To lose oneself in the action and to embarrass oneself helps to create a group spirit and discussion’ (Väliaho, 2011). Hence, while the supposed infantilization is spoken of as a ‘manly’ problem (that includes the acquiring of an abundance of toys), the free play of adults in general is recognized to have positive effects.



A sign regulating uncontrolled (and thus ‘infantile’) play at the Madonna Inn hotel near San Luis Obispo, California, 2011.

Some forms of playing and activities are clearly more childish than others, regardless of their content. Perhaps the most childish activity is to play with toys, says Virtanen in an article written in the 1980s (1981, 73). Many adults admire the freedom of youth and turn it into a lifestyle rather than a life stage (Cross, 2004, 11). The ultimate contemporary Peter Pan is in Cross’ view Hugh Hefner, who is the boy who never grew up. He built a playground and everyone came to play with him. Hefner is a man who lives in a house full of toys (2008, 75).¹⁰¹

According to one of my sources, some 50% of all toys sold in the U.S., EU and Japan are consumed by adults (*Think, make, play*, 2007, 85). Over £230 (approximately 290 euros in year 2012) is spent on toys purchased for people over the age of 18 – two thirds of that is spent on men.¹⁰² But should the supposed infantilization be viewed as a regressive state – or instead, a way of finally admitting that playthings – and *play with things* – are potentially interesting for a broader demographic?

The power of toys is not about regression or infantilism. It is the recognition of possibility. Toys are symbols that have a figurative power to embody thoughts and emotions that might have their origins in childhood, but are not childish. We recognize parts of ourselves – our secret, wishing selves-in toys. The part of us a toy touches is our unexpressed, dream (self) (Phoenix, 2006, 7).

¹⁰¹ Clark points to this phenomenon also as ‘the Harley-Davidson effect’ (2007, 135).

¹⁰² British Toy & Hobby Association, NPD Group data, press material hand-out at London Toy Fair 2011.

Despite an abundance of toys, sometimes children, perhaps paradoxically, prefer an everyday item which is used as a method of learning and as a tool for the imagination. In other words, they isolate an object from its context and function, and give it new meaning in the realm of play (Annicchiarico, 2005). For an adult, it seems more suitable to turn to actual toys when one wants to play, than for example, use a cardboard box (that looks like a cardboard box) as a vehicle for the imagination.

To this day, surprisingly little has been written about how toy play is manifested at adult age. My presumption is still that when adults play with a 'toy' in most traditional sense, they will play with either a mass-produced toy or they will make the toy themselves. Nevertheless, they do not take an everyday object such as a cardboard box and use it as such in their play. But they may nevertheless create a toy of the box, when they manipulate the material so that the transformation of the object into a toy is clearly seen. Here is where the imagination of children and adults differ. Furthermore, I believe, that this is a reason for why so many adults play with 'ready-made' toys; they need the play prop in order to trigger their play instinct.

According to Riihonen, there are about 1 million playing children in Finland, 1.5 million in Sweden and 65 million in Europe (1991, 138). What if on top of these figures, the number of playing adult people was added?

This may be a challenging, if not altogether impossible task: Adults rarely admit to playing, even when they talk about their toys. Rafael Helanko writes that play stays in us as we become adults, but it takes a hidden form (Helanko, 1980 in Soini, 1991, 10). Soini notes that Helanko sees play as a primary state of mind that the free human being strives for. It is culture that arouses secondary activities that hinder the individual from playing (Soini 1991, 10).

"Why do we have to grow up and stop playing, learning and experiencing with toys as we grow older?", asks toy designer Peter Wachtel in an industry article published in 2012 (Wachtel, 2012). Many people imagine that there is a moment at which you become an adult, and from then on, play comes a secondary consideration (Pauli & Colombo, 2005). There are good reasons for this, as the prevailing idea in society stresses playthings as something that should limit themselves behind the closed doors of the nursery. Nick Lee notes, however, that 'children are not always at play and adults are not always involved in serious activities' (Lee, 2001, 142). In other words, there is a possibility to look at the adult as a representative of homo ludens. In my understanding, this should be done by keeping a positive attitude, not resorting altogether to the rather pessimistic viewpoints that the discussion on infantilization seems to connect playing (and toys) with.

Adults and toys

Parents and others are very arbitrary in deciding the age when a child should stop having his or her Teddy Bear around. My mother thought sixteen was about the right time. I still think she was wrong and I'm sure Theodore agrees with me (Bull, 1969, 53).

We do not know for certain whether or not the first playthings were intended to be used in play, but there is much evidence that playthings such as balloons in the eighteenth century France or toy soldiers much earlier than that were enjoyed first by adults and then passed down to children, writes Cross (2008, 31). Throughout history, toys were constructed for the amusement of adults, claims del Vecchio (2003, 18). As previously stated, the age of Romanticism contributed to a new understanding of toys as artefacts designed for use in childhood. However, there are examples of writings from the 20th century that express a persuasion of adults to return to toy play. Italian futurists Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla write: "The Futurist toy will be very useful to the adult too, because it will keep him young, nimble, joyful, carefree, ready for anything, tireless, instinctive and intuitive" (Cavadini, 2010–2011, 183). The suggested benefits of toy play at adult age are thus not exclusively a recent rhetorical development.



Kidults' toys in focus at Hong Kong International Toy fair, January 2013.

As Sutton-Smith puts it, toys are matters of considerable cultural importance, not just something that children play with (1986, 11). 'Many of the objects that today might be considered children's toys – dolls and miniatures of various sorts – were often the decorative possessions of adults, especially of adults with means, as much as of children', notes Chudacoff (2007, 6). This holds true until today, as illustrated by one doll house enthusiast: 'The children are allowed to play with the dollhouse, but first and foremost it's a hobby of adults' (Walamies, 2011, 36).

Bo Lönnqvist's view on adults and toys is rather pessimistic. He says that an adult can, despite toys, not really return to childhood (Lönnqvist, 1981, 66). The protected world of children as produced by adults is not entirely capable of abolishing the creative imagination of children that brings toys to life. Lönnqvist argues that a child does not need a plaything as much as the adults think – a child may be an adult without a toy, first and foremost a human being, whereas an adult may, despite the toy, return to her childhood. For a child, writes Soini about Lönnqvist's notion, the plaything may function as a key to reality. For an adult, it is unreal, a key that makes it possible to leave reality behind (Lönnqvist 1981 in Soini 1991, 9).

While childhood seems to be a phase of life that is protected in many ways, also by promoting the advantages of play, adult interaction with toys is not considered thoroughly acceptable, unless it happens in the company of a child, attenuated, or in the name of 'hobbying', as seen in the previous part of the chapter. Additionally, according to Riitta Rastas, adults may also find it difficult to spontaneously enter the "as if" sphere of play (Rastas, 2011, 328).

Walter Benjamin says that it is impossible to construct children's play activities in the fantasy realm, a fairytale of pure childhood or pure art. He sees toys as a site of conflict, less of the child with the adult than of the adult with the child. "For who gives the child his toys if not adults?" (Benjamin 2005b, 118). Still, when considering toy industry people, as illustrated in Chapter 3, many confess 'being a kid at heart' – meaning that one has to be capable of entering the sphere of play even at adult age – otherwise it might be too challenging to work in a business that aims at catering for play experiences.

An adult may have a second childhood if he or she has an appreciation of toys, a good memory, and he or she is an active player, says 'Dr.Toy' Stevanne Auerbach (2004, 13). Yoav Ziv, Israeli toy designer and toy design lecturer at Shenkar College of Design, notes that when adults are designing or buying toys, they are reflecting on childhood memories and nostalgia. In fact, he says 'in designing, we put a lot of our memories in the toys' (Ziv, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). From a player perspective, again, an adult may, most of all, be interested in something that is completely new – perhaps a designer toy of today. When nostalgia (which will be further explored in Chapter 8 dealing with the time-related dimension of toys) is out of the question, how should we start the discussion on the (possibility) of the toy playing adult?

In the majority of markets, writes Utku, the percentage of traditional toys and games that target adults (population aged 20 and over) remains below 10% (Utku, 2013). In Japan, however, which is also one of the major sites for new characters and thus character/designer toy development, toys targeted to over 20-year-olds, accounted for more than

23% of all traditional toy sales. 'A large number of e.g. collectible action figures and capsule (vending) toys are now aimed at adults' (ibid.).

How do adults in the western world, then, understand the concept of a toy?

Sand box, Barbies, Tamagotchi, PS3 games, Star Wars figurines, Tecnic Legos (purchased with over 3000 euros), RC toys (cars, boats, helicopters, planes), laser swords, Nintendo, miniatures, Disney films, a camera, Hello Kitty, Soft toy bunny, paper dolls, Betty Boop, scraps...

On the 12th of August 2010 popular radio channel NRJ Finland posted a question on its website asking: What kind of toys are you, an adult individual, playing with? I took advantage of the opportunity to see what young adults confessed to 'toying with' and collected the answers from the 20 first comments published on NRJ's Facebook site. The answers (partly quoted above) revealed a wide range of artefacts and gaming devices and some names of well-known characters and brand names. If these answers are to be believed, contemporary adults have rather an unstructured view of what may be understood as a toy. At the same time this reveals, nevertheless, that young adults have a leisurely take on the subject of toy play.

Susan Stewart reminds the reader that toys were primarily objects meant for adult use: The fashion doll, for example, was the plaything of adult women before it was the plaything of the child. In Stewart's thinking (1993, 57), the toy world presents a projection of the world of everyday life. In the following, we will therefore take a closer look at the toy playing adult.

I don't know if it has to do with that I don't have children of my own, but my apartment is full of toys and sort of like my mother says, I feel like a child myself that I have probably never grown up... I have my old toys and there are more coming and when younger, I think when I was at junior level in school, when I did not get soft toys as Christmas gifts any more because I was too old for that and I was quite displeased with that... After that I have been buying them for myself. (TA/ht)

The toy industry seems to acknowledge the urge of adults (and teenagers) to play, or want to encourage them to ludic engagement. But, often, this is articulated as toy play happening together with children, as a leaflet from the British Toy & Hobby Association illustrates:



Adults photographed at Adult Toy Day in Pori, Finland, May 2009.

It's not only children who benefit from time spent playing. Adults who take time to enjoy play with children will find it both relaxing and stimulating – helping themselves get in touch with their 'inner child'. There's nothing like kicking your shoes and getting into the mindset of a child, to give you a break from being a grown-up! (Solutions Through Fun, 2009).

A German writing from 1902 revealed sheepishly “that in all secrecy I want to reveal to you that there are very many adults who play with toy trains. I know a couple in Hamburg that have erected a railroad in one room of their home”.¹⁰³ My personal take on this matter is that adults do play (with or without preparing anything), but want to keep their activities only in the knowledge of the like-minded, as the ‘hush-hush’ quote above illustrates. Understanding the individual reasons for ludic engagement in general, and for adults in particular, would however advance the understanding of play as a

¹⁰³ See von Spielberg, 1902, cited in Ganaway, 2008, 380) Hanns von Spielberg, “Mechanisches Spielzeug,” *Velhagen & Klasings Monatshefte*, XVII:4 (December 1902, 482–483).

means to actively improve one's own well-being and the experienced quality of life, as van Leeuwen and Westwood wisely point out (2008, 160). Toy play as a category of play does in my thinking has the potential of increasing happiness and creativity at adult age. Also, how an adult comes to acquire a toy, differs from how a child does. An eight-year-old girl summed it up by saying, “Kids get toys. You don't have to pay for the toys you get. And that [is] why I think being a kid is the best” (Kurnit, 2009). For the adult, acquiring the toy is something of an investment. Adults receive toys more seldom as gifts, although I am sure they do.

The difference between men and boys is in the price of their toys, say Blatner and Blatner (1997). This on the one hand is true, and on the other not. For depending on how we define a plaything, an adult may spend a fortune on it (if we speak of say, a vehicle), but again, a toy may be acquired from e.g. a flea market for a very small sum. I do think that the monetary value of the toy does not define its attraction, nor, play value – even its wow. As Auerbach writes, a simple plaything such as a plush toy may generate pleasure for its adult owner:

You might consider a stuffed animal for yourself, too, as a liaison between you and your little boy's soft toy, or simply for your own pleasure. Buy one or a few for yourself. After all, why should children be the only ones to enjoy stuffed animals? (Auerbach, 2004, 112).

KH: How does adult toy play differ from children's use of toys?

Interviewee: Kids look at toys from the utility perspective than the art perspective. (TD/ls)

Seen from the viewpoint of adults playing may be something futile, but I think it can seriously be said that it [making art] comes close to play because you make sense of the mind, or try to achieve some emotions through making, explore and try out just like children do in play. (TA/kt)

Henricks says that ‘When players look outside the event of play for their motivations, play starts to acquire the qualities of work, or as Huizinga (1955) says, becomes serious in a utilitarian sense’ (2011, 240–241). The toys of children and adults may then be exactly similar, but the difference between these play cultures that are viewed as separate from one another in the framework of this thesis, lies in the ways adults view the toy. The main point to make here is that in adult toy play, the possibility of seriousness may present itself. As we will see later in the course of the thesis, this seriousness that



Estelle. A work of art and a toy created by Finnish doll artist Christel Putro, photographed by the artist, 2008.

presents itself in adult toy play may not have to do with utility, as Huizinga believes, but in that the play activity may come to have creative and productive, and in this way, visible outcomes. Moreover, Sutton-Smith notes that children's and adults' play are also quite different, that of children being open, or creative, and that of adults being closed, or reactive (1997, 19).

By looking at historical texts we will, in fact, see that the attitude towards the toy playing teenager or adult, has been quite positive. For instance, Walter Benjamin writes in the 1920s: 'When the urge to play overcomes an adult, this is not simply a regression to childhood. To be sure, play is always liberating' (Benjamin, 2005c, 100). Another example, this time from a Finnish text discussing play (from 1913) says:

From time to time can girls especially, as adults take hold of their playthings and even play with them. If they because of that neglect their duties, should they be given a mild correction. But otherwise, one should rejoice about that a rightful child's mind reminds in them. It is then not suitable to mock them [by saying] "Look at the big baby" [...]"(Vilho, 1913, 47, transl. by the author).

The TIA, namely The Toy Association of America lists 'playful hobbies, such as gardening, photography, scrapbooking, aquariums, puzzles, drawing, painting, knitting, sewing, listening to music or playing an instrument, reading, writing, poetry, and taking mini-vacations are some ways to play as an adult'.¹⁰⁴ Somewhat paradoxically, playing with the kind of toys that my study concerns are not listed here. Is play important for teenagers/adults? Of course, answers play scholar Jeffrey Goldstein:

Although adults do not refer to their hobbies and leisure activities as 'play' or their hobbies/collections as 'toys', they are. Sports, dancing, crossword puzzles, Sudoku and gambling are all forms of social play. So too is humour. Adults recognise the importance of these activities but do not always acknowledge them as play. (Comments on the value of play, Professor Jeffrey Goldstein, Utrecht University, TIE Newsletter, November 25th, 2011)

In a recent report about the toy play of teenagers, the following was stated:

...young people play in a different way from children. You don't stand an earthly chance with building blocks or dolls, and naturally it's electronic gaming that's the most important. But classic parlour games are also popular with teens. And then there's the next generation of model-making enthusiasts... (Axel Dammler in Toys 4 Teens leaflet, 3).

KH: In which ways do you think that adults use toy objects. Do they really play with them?

Drt: Well sometimes they do and sometimes they don't, again depending on the person. They may have objects on their desk at work, to be conversation starters. They may ... when they get stressed actually play and interact with something or talk to them, or do something with it that help them.

¹⁰⁴ See "Stages of Play - Early Adulthood (18-34 years)" at http://www.toyassociation.org/TINFO_Stages_of_

Let us take one last example when discussing the toy playing adult, this time in reference to Star Wars, one of the largest toy and entertainment phenomena in the world. In 2011, I had the possibility to ask Howard Roffman from Lucas Licensing, how he sees the adult as a potential Star Wars toy player in terms of the development of the toys in question.

KH: How consciously are new Star Wars toys developed with the adult player in mind?

Howard Roffman (Lucas Licensing): The adults would certainly not admit to playing with the toys. When the products are right for kids, the products are also right for adult collectors. So the products are consciously aimed towards adults. (*The Force of Three Generations*, 2011)

As the excerpt shows, although the possibility of adults as actual toy players is not expressed verbally in the example, it is still recognized by the industry, if somewhat poorly.¹⁰⁵ When studying the toy playing adult, we must then turn to the players themselves to see what they have to say about their engagement with toys. To continue the discussion on Star Wars, and keeping in mind that action figures are one toy type that my study employs, let us take a look how an adult player clarifies his stand:

It was, after all, my love of Star Wars that first made me need my action figures, and it's now a love of action figures that all but rules my life. Not only do I appreciate the artistic talent and skill required to designed these so-called children's toys, but I also, even now at the age of twenty-six, enjoy playing with them (Horsley, 2006, 189).

As we have explored in this part of the thesis, adults and toys are not always thought to go together in a positive manner. This is because toys are still, according to a general belief, artefacts that belong to childhood (and according to many, should stay there).

¹⁰⁵One of the first signs of showing interest in 'kidult' players coming from the industry side was shown by the organizers of the Hong Kong International Toy Fair in January 2013, which as a fair theme, focused on adults – 'collectors and other toy aficionados'. As it was stated in an industry-related article, "this target group has plenty of money to spend and expects a very high level of product quality, which is why many companies have already introduced two lines of the same product groups. The products exhibited at the event will include toy cars, collectible dolls, trains and other mechanical toys. See "Kidult World" – Highlight in Hong Kong" Interview with Susan Lam, Director of Germany & Central Europe, HKTDC in *Toys Up Fair* issue 2013, 55. What is of interest for the researcher is the need for the different lines for adults and children, and on the other hand the toy types showcased at the Kidult World section in Hong Kong, which were mostly targeted to male players and did not include e.g. any soft toys at all.



Opposites attract, 2009

Also, we have seen, an adult who owns and lives with toys, may be considered to suffer from a post-modern condition, namely infantilization. Further, even a toy owner him/herself may not recognize his/her interaction with playthings as play.

On the contrary, we have also been able to detect the benefits of play on a more general level. The remainder of the thesis will lean on this attitude when addressing adults as toy players. The possibilities to play are probably endless. In my suggestion, toy play per se is about engaging with the toy in many ways; trying out, manipulating, altering something in a pleasurable way. One can play with a person, an animal, an object. To 'toy' with something is to interact with the counterpart – be it material or human – in a way that gives the player the sensation the joy of discovering or creating something new. Whereas playing with another person may create pleasurable stimuli for both, playing with an object is about exploring its limits and possibilities – and enjoying it!

Most adults are kids in their thinking! (TD/sp)

In a recent example from an interview addressing play, Finnish contemporary artist Anna Retulainen suggests that the small cottages of allotment gardens (in Finnish *siirtolapuutarhamökki*) are in fact playhouses for adults. In these environments, adults play another life apart from home (Kontkanen 2012, 86). Play at adult age may indeed happen anywhere. Also, it can happen with *any thing*. Most interestingly when considering the scope of this thesis, adults have come to recognize more and more the possibility of play in the actual playthings as well. An excerpt from an interview with a 42-year-old toy owner demonstrates that the toy characters in adult ownership are necessarily not 'leftovers' from childhood:

Puppy [stuffed dog soft toy] isn't a holdover from childhood, but a more recent acquisition. Puppy goes everywhere I go. He's kind of my security blanket. ... Puppy is more of a priority than my cell phone or purse (See Mayerowitz, 2010).

As we have seen in this part of this thesis, throughout the time when toys have been produced industrially, adults have also used toys as bribes, instruments for bonding and affection (Chudacoff, 2007, 6). Mostly, history regards the relationship between adults and toys to have a connection to the child. However, as I have suggested, we need to see the possibility of adults as a specific target group and a playing audience for toys. Therefore, the last part of the chapter is dedicated to a presentation about new playthings for the adult audience. Here, we will take a closer look at the playthings that the toy

playing adults have employed as their play material for the past years in particular.

Oded Friedland, Israeli toy designer admits to 'designing products that nobody really needs for infantile adults' (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). The playing adult, perhaps does not need a toy in the same way as society thinks that children do, but acquiring and playing with toys, does seem to be an attractive activity for the contemporary adult (infantilized or not).

Toy researcher Gilles Brougère notes that giving a toy means giving pleasure (Brougère, 1999, 110). This would imply, then, that for an adult buying a toy would mean buying pleasure. My presumption is thus that in a toy, the adult player wants to maximise the pleasure on many levels, such as the visual, tactile and narrative levels.

Toy designer Alex Hochstrasser says that it is the children who decide what is a good toy. "A non-toy", for example a cardboard box used in play, can be a satisfactory toy for a child (Hochstrasser, 2011, *From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). Generally "you don't need to sell children what to do" with any object. For adults, again, artefacts seem to need to communicate more specifically about their affordances, especially when it comes to play. A perceived *play affordance*, in other words depends on the age of the user (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008, 4). I therefore propose that for adults a thing for play must first be a toy, and second, to communicate playfulness in order to be capable of inviting a person to play.

Finally, as Lauwaert suggests, toys are 'generation-shapers'. This means that 'toys can either tie generations to one another through communal play, shared toys and play-related memories or to create a rift between different generations when (grand-)parents and children cannot find a common ground in play' (Lauwaert, 2009, 40–41).

I would say an iPod is an adult toy. It's purely an entertainment device, you play games with it. (TD/sp)

...all the time when they [adults] buy a new phone or a gadget or their sportscar or something. They're probably not thinking in the same way as a tool for learning, [...] ...I think they get it when it comes to you in a form of sports like tennis, golf where there is equipment, always looking for new interesting equipment, they think of it probably as a toy in some sense...(TD/bb)

When children play they develop skills. Most of the play and the toys [of adults] are sport-related. The toys that develop mentally would be card games and board games. The aesthetic changes, it is less like a toy, but in essence these are still toys. Leisure and recreation. (TD/bk)

Undoubtedly, the meaning of the term toy has expanded a great deal as compared to the first artefacts that are considered as things meant for play. As the interviewees point out in the examples above, if you ask what kind of toys adults are playing with, people do not necessarily answer in terms of the toy types that are of interest in a study like this one. Today toys (in the meaning of ‘traditional’ playthings and not sex toys or technological gadgets) are no longer just playthings for children, notes Phoenix (2006). Fraser, writing in the 1970s, considers all souvenirs, ‘down to the souvenirs of the fairground like the fluffy monkey on an elastic string, are in fact a form of adult toy. The history of toys is full of objects of grandeur and richness which clearly placed them in the sphere of adult toy, rather than a child’s plaything, even at the date which they were made’ (Fraser, 1972, 22). Again, modern toys separate the younger generation from the older, notes Chudacoff (2007, 195).¹⁰⁶ As we have seen, Neil Postman already argued in the 1990s that adults are more like children and children more like adults (1994, 18). Children’s “aspirational age” has risen, while that of adults has fallen, notes Chudacoff (2007, 217).¹⁰⁷ Moreover, as Kurnit notes of the KGOY phenomenon, what marketers began to talk about and target was a shift in behavior. Preschoolers were beginning to act like kids, he says. ‘They would cast off their preschool toys and adopt play patterns and product requests that included fashion dolls and action figures. Older kids were “graduating” from classic toy play earlier. Kids had checked out of toys at age eight’ (Kurnit, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ Also see Gary Cross (1997) *Kid’s Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 171, 238; Cross, (2004) *The Cute and the Cool; Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 154-55) and Kline, (1993) *Out of the Garden*, 99).

¹⁰⁷ Also see Susan Linn (2004) *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, Free Press, New York, 111, 132.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the preferences in toys comparing contemporary toys for children and adults seem to follow a two-way development. As children are assumed to be growing older at a younger age (KGOY), so are the toy characters targeted to them. In a toy study conducted in Sweden, the nurseries revealed that 3% of the doll characters depict babies, 24% children and 73% adults (Nelson & Nilsson, 2002, 138). According to an industry professional, designers should pay attention to trends for girls in slightly older age groups because a young girl always wants to emulate her older sister (Miller-Winkler 2009, 19). But things develop fast in the toy industry and now we can detect another trend that goes in the opposite direction: Kurnit notes that ‘we now have a new term as an important counterweight to KGOY. Kids growing older younger is now counter balanced by Kids Staying Younger Longer (KSYL). The toy industry is prospering with a resurgence of 1980s phenomenon toys including My Little Pony, Littlest Pet Shop, Strawberry Shortcake, Transformers and GI Joe. Barbie is putting up a better fight against Bratz’ (Kurnit, 2009). As a matter of fact, also adults, are playing with these same toys. What more to consider, then, when discussing the toy playing adult?

KH: In which ways do adults use toy objects?

Interviewee: Sex toys, a large market not to be denied. But about vinyl [designer] toys, adults use the toys as art in comparison as vehicle for imagination as the kids do. (TD/Is)

Although as the respondent refers to sex toys in the quote above, this is not all there is to this development. What Phoenix means is that we have seen a transformation of the toy into an art object. Moreover, as already noted in the introduction of this book, ‘the toy aesthetic seems to have had an impact on many of the household objects and furnishings that surround us. Our relationship to our tools has been transformed, through style and color, through intelligent and playful design’, says Phoenix (2006, 97). More specifically, we have been witnessing the development of a new toy category, namely the one of designer toys. Perhaps more than ever, toys of today are, because of this category, consciously targeted at adults as well.



Hidrobot San Francisco, 2009

Chapter 6: Cross-sections between contemporary toy cultures

The toy as an industrial product reflects the difference between an adult and a child, the difference between work and play, it reinforces differences between different groups in terms of economics, gender, nationality and population (Lönnqvist, 1981, 65).

At this point, it has become evident that toys cannot be ‘lived’ as experiences until they are experienced through play. From a thorough review of diverse theories of play and viewpoints of toy play both in childhood and at adult age, I will now move on to demonstrate *where* toy play happens in the world of today – in other words the places of play performance.

In the following, I will explore the environments that constitute the places of play performance for contemporary toy players and at the same time, environments that afford the researcher to analyze this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives.

As Henricks notes, play is simply too broad and evanescent a concept to be contrasted by any one field (2006, 3). At the same time, play is always a matter of *context* (Nachmanovitz, 1990, 43, my accentuation). In order to gain a better understanding of adults as toy players, we must examine the(ir) *cultures of play*. The cultures examined here are play environments that are manifested in different areas of culture, across space and time and that exceed the boundaries between the corporeal and the virtual, the self and society.

As Lönnqvist reminds, through play and the artefacts related to play, we may blur, deepen and vary reality (1991, 20 orig. quote from Lili E. Peller) The inspection of different areas of contemporary culture enable us to gain a deeper understanding of current attitudes towards toys. Moreover, by inspecting where play happens, we will be better informed about attitudes towards toys and activities partaken with them.

In this chapter, I wish additionally to shed light on the different areas of culture that come to have meaning for how and why adult toy play happens. What I’m suggesting in the framework of the chapter is that different cultural realms may be seen as *playgrounds* that allow adults to take different standpoints towards toys. Thus, these playgrounds can be seen to contextualize the contemporary ‘toy stories’ of the toy players of today in areas of culture that are already recognized as platforms of cultural activity. In fact, they can be seen as realms that appear far more perceivable and maybe also more graspable than adult toy play as a holistic phenomenon. This is because these playgrounds are also already acknowledged as sites for ‘serious’ play such as commerce and high art.



Fashiondoll series, 2009

In the following section and before presenting adult toy play in terms of its spatial and time-related characteristics and as a site for exploring identity and the self, I will turn to the cultural are(n)as of adult play, which enable the players to participate in various forms of interaction with toys. I have decided to call these areas the playgrounds of design culture, material culture, popular culture, fan culture, visual culture, digital and social cultures. The decision to make divisions between the aforementioned realms is based on the fact that although their borders may blur when put together in this way, they still represent areas that are often examined through different academic methods of analysis. Each of these realms also has its own debates and research traditions that cannot be elaborated on in this thesis. What I wish to attain by including all of these areas in the analysis, is a holistic understanding of adult toy play as a phenomenon that cannot possibly be grasped only by looking at one or perhaps two cultures. Instead, I would like to propose that the object of study represents a cross-section between the different playgrounds of culture.

Play scholar Hakkarainen notes, that we perceive and take a standpoint towards objects in relation to time, space and other individuals. In order to create social play, the players need to agree on the theme of play and where it will happen (Hakkarainen, 1991, 56). Although toy play happens in the world of artists, I have in the context of this chapter decided to integrate the making of art into realms of material, design and visual cultures. As will be illustrated further, the artists 'toying' with playthings as inspirational sources, material resources and actual artworks, will be dealt with in the chapter that profiles different groups of adult players as interviewed for this thesis.

If it is not popular, then it is not culture, says a tongue-in-cheek banner slogan on the website for the South West/Texas chapter for the Popular Culture Association in America (See <http://swtxpca.org/>). Depending on the reading, toys are regarded as childhood playthings, designed products or artistic objects to name a few perspectives that are highlighted in this thesis. When we look at toys, there is a culture behind them, says Stevanne Auerbach (Interview with DrT). Again, in an article in the Swedish toy trade magazine, *Leksaksrevyn* (3/2011, 18) it says: What is present-day in popular culture, becomes play at once. Overall, one could say that I highlight mass-produced toys from the perspective of popular culture. Thus, popular culture functions as a comprehensive umbrella term – a starting point for a closer examination of the places of performance in contemporary toy cultures.

To see uniformity between mass-produced and mass-culture would however not be wise, for as media scholar Henry Jenkins reminds us, there is a difference between mass culture and popular culture: 'Mass culture is mass-produced for a mass-audience.

Popular culture is what happens to those cultural artefacts at the site of consumption, as we draw upon them as resources in our everyday life' (Jenkins, 2007b, 65).

As I have already stressed in Chapter 2, by choosing to focus on dolls, soft toys and various kinds of action figures, I have chosen categories of toys that are considered widely popular among players of all ages. Thus, it becomes justifiable to argue that the thesis at hand deals with a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in popular culture of the present.

Dan Fleming suggests that toys go under the topic of popular culture because 'toys are part of media-sustained popular culture generally' (1999, 369). del Vecchio supports this argument by saying that once toys found a place on television, they became an enduring part of pop culture (2003, 20–21). When highlighting popular culture as a general realm, it goes without saying that the role of different media becomes important to remember and to clarify.

When we consider children in relation to mass media and pop culture, we tend to define them as consumers, watchers, recipients, victims. But they are also users of that media culture: they are choosers, interpreters, shapers, fellow players, participants, and storytellers (Jones, 2002, 18–19).

I would like to extend the argument made by Jones and as demonstrated above, to include adults as well. For adults not only design the majority of the mass-produced toys of today, adults are also the consumers; the choosers, interpreters, shapers, fellow players, participants and the storytellers just like the players in their childhood years. Communicating with contemporary media culture is central for both the toy designer and the toy player. Again, understanding toys as both a medium dependent on other media is of crucial importance for a toy researcher.

Many of the most successful toy designers are according to Levy and Weingartner innovative thinkers and marketers with a keen sense of product and pop culture (2003). Therefore, toymakers need to think about how their toy concepts can connect with popular culture in ways children and parents will appreciate (del Vecchio, 2003, 243). Further, the toy 'maker' (both the designer and the producer/marketer of toys) needs to acknowledge the fact that adults are also an audience for toys that should not be overlooked in the process of ideating, developing, producing, marketing and defining the importance of toys in general.

Playgrounds

This chapter introduces the part of the thesis that focuses on defining the multiple cultures of toy play for which I have chosen to use the common term 'playgrounds'. I will start with a discussion of material culture that examines the toy as a physical object and a part of our material environment. From the material, I will continue onwards to a brief overview of design culture, and how it connects to contemporary toy play. From the 'designerly' I will move on to look at fan culture and how fandom has been addressed in previous media-related studies as a site for creative endeavours. Further on, I will bring forward visual culture as an important area in contemporary toy play and finally, move to the online worlds of social and media cultures to address, how new platforms of media cannot be neglected as play spaces even when the material artefacts of play – mass-produced toys – are discussed. These contexts as described, frame the analyses presented in the remainder of the thesis.

These are the places of play performance, where the *flow of play* happens. Perhaps this 'supersystem' of cultures is the only way of looking at contemporary adult toy play in order to really understand how toys not only limit themselves to popular culture, but to several other areas of human experience as well. By examining the different cultures that connect to toys, we will see that the argument made by Brown holds true: 'Play is culturally cultivated. In the adult world, play continues to be woven into the fabric of culture' (Brown, 2009, 199).

It is significantly important to understand that this mapping of the various fabrics of culture is produced by myself as a toy researcher. A context is a matter that links the objective of the study with the choices made by the researcher. As art historian Tutta Palin points out, in research the context is always something being produced – not something that can be found and brought forward as such from history (Palin, 1998, 116). To contextualize the phenomenon under study is a necessity, since my wish is to present the dimensions of adult toy play in contemporary toy cultures as a chapter of the ludic turn that already has an effect on how attitudes and activities related to the toy and to toy play manifest in our world.



Toys from artist Katja Tukiainen's collection. Photographed by Katja Tukiainen, 2009.

Material culture

... what draws a person to an object is always an idea, it might just be an intense love for the material reality of the object itself (Budnitz, 2006, 8).

In the wealthier parts of the world, notes Ruckenstein, mass-produced toys are an unavoidable and indispensable part of the material world (2008, 87). A toy is often a child's first possession. It is also the first 'not-me' possession of the child – a transitional object that will ultimately disconnect the child from his/her parent. Pantan (2006) discusses Star Wars toys as children's material culture capital. Today, every child is estimated to have approximately 300 toys, whereas in the 1950s the volume was only a fraction of this number (Römpötti, 2012).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ The 300 toys most probably refers to the number of toys of a child in a western society. This data comes from a Finnish news paper article.

There is growing scholarly attention focused on material culture. In studying culture we are examining 'objects' (Fleming, 1996, 14). Crouch argues that objects are key factors in understanding cultural life, for every society is responsible for the sort of designed objects that it uses (Crouch, 1990). When we confront a thing, say Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, we usually do so in the context of cultural meanings that help us interpret the object (1981, 50).

First, there is the plaything, a product – the material manifestation of playful design work and an artefact loaded with suggestions for a potential play experience – the toy. The examination of material culture in the name of toy play will concentrate on the physical object.

Finnish author Hannu-Pekka Björkman writes of Armand Ferdinand Thüring (also known by the name Schulthess), who said in his book *Fetishes*: "Not only my head and my limbs are a part of my inner being, but also my clothes and the things in my room. My books. Everything that is in the realm of my influence. You will gain more real information about me in my room and my clothes than in my lungs or my heart" (Björkman, 2011).

According to Dewey (2005), we engage with objects in order to create experiences. As we have seen, we also design objects with particular experiences in mind. These experiences are either individual or shared. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton say 'objects serve to express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment. Relations with material things have powerful consequences for human experience' (1981, 43). Seiter argues further that 'adults as well as children invest intense feeling in objects and attribute a wealth of personal and idiosyncratic meanings in mass-produced goods' (1995, 9). So by examining objects, we will not only learn about their owners but their communication with peer groups within society.

It is probably therefore suitable to suggest the realm of material culture as the first 'playground' where adult toy play happens. When something is designed, certain meanings are encapsulated in this design work. Again, when people acquire and use things, different meanings are created. The owner of an object attaches a value to it and the process is two-fold: The object may have a monetary value. Also, the object may, and often will, be attached with emotional meanings that may or may not be communicable to other people.

Possible constituents of play value were already touched upon in Chapters 3 and 4. I will now return to elaborate further on how some material dimensions of toys that are considered as important. Toys, as it seems, were the first products of handcraft made of for example clay by individuals for ritualistic use.

In the pre-industrial age these artefacts began to appear as serial work of carpenters and metal smiths and produced mostly out of wood and tin. In terms of raw-material, toys of the industrial age often utilized ceramics, paper and textiles besides wood.

Post-war, mass-produced toys of the 20th century on the other hand, were mainly made of plastic. Plastic became an epitome for toys, its shiny surface something that communicated a completely novel approach to producing things for play. In other words, the raw material allowed mass-produced that had been impossible before.

... industrial values are seen in the new materials and the resultant uniformity of toy products. To Barthes, the repetitious plastic forms represent the triumph of an 'inhuman' industrial feel over the innocent, more organic playthings of children's traditional culture (Kline, 1993, 146).

In his well known essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) Walter Benjamin used the term 'aura' in relation to objects that lost something of their intrinsic allure in their mechanical production. Benjamin liked wooden toys because according to him, their aura was sustained in the raw-material. Wooden toys are often connected with an outstanding intrinsic quality that will endure over time.

The aura of a toy is not, however, fully a result of its raw-material. For a long time, I have agreed with Robbins who states: 'it can be argued that toys (even mass-produced ones) do have an aura, which is manifested through play and fetishized collecting rituals' (2006, 202). The aura of the toy does, in this light, not disappear through industrial mass-production – on the contrary, this seems to reinforce its power. Ultimately, it is the player who will ensure that the aura will stay in its place, because of his/her actions of play come to give the toy a *glow* as will be explained in more detail in this thesis.

After the Second World War, from the 1940s onwards most of the mass-produced toys in the western world used plastic as their raw material. Because of this, they became more a part of popular culture rather than craft culture, and through emerging licensing activities that required toys to be produced *en mass* also started to play an important role in the licensing business. Today, besides other materials, wood is still used in many toy types including character (designer) toys.

The question of raw material in toys, nevertheless, extends beyond questions of auratic value – sturdy material such as wood and the plastic used for Lego bricks are considered to have a sustainable, durable quality compared to more easily breakable plastics. Wooden toys are also associated with developmental benefits (for the child) more often than plastic toys (perhaps with the exception of the aforementioned Lego bricks). But the importance of plastic for the cultures of play can hardly be denied. Phoenix, writes:

Perhaps plastic was meant to be made into toys because, above all else, plastic is the mutable material of the imagination. A toy is the embodiment of plasticity. The plastic toy can be throwaway or collectible; it can adapt to any context, and its low cost means that it can be produced in hundreds, or thousands, or tens of thousands, a multicolored, many-headed army spreading out to colonize the world with plastic culture (Phoenix, 2006, 7).

We look at the materiality of its daily existence and the processes that deliver those things, so the processes of technology [and] the meaning of all that is relevant to contemporary culture. (TD/r)

Seen in this way, the choice of material for a toy matters first for the toy designer and second for the consumer/player who ultimately decides how the toy product will be perceived on the market and used in play. Today, as it turns out, novel designer toys seem to take a turn towards the materials with historical significance; textiles, wood – even paper. Plastic, especially in the form of vinyl continues to thrive, but designers are constantly coming up with new ideas about the materiality of toys. The most innovative toys represent combinations of the traditional wood and more contemporary plastics, or wood combined with, for example magnetic metal. However, as I will demonstrate further, vinyl is one of the most important raw materials used in the production of contemporary toys and especially in those toys targeted and preferred by the adult audience.¹⁰⁹

The characters of House of Ingri were previously handmade of vinyl familiar from car interiors. Nowadays the toys are made of a fabric friendlier for the touch - fleece. The designer tells me that her two-year-old daughter likes to use them as pillows. (Heljakka, Lelukauppia, 2011)

Much play is based in touch, says Pesce (2000, 22). Getting to know a toy by looking and touching it, is clearly a first step toward imaginative play, says Kline (1999, 212). Manipulation of toys is a central experience in adult toy play too. Roger Harkavy (writer to designer toy magazines) says: 'For me, vinyl toys are about the tactile experience' (*Super 7 The Book*, 2005, 163).

¹⁰⁹ For example, some new toy vehicles (cars, motorbikes) combine wood and plastics. Another example are wooden building blocks with integrated magnets.

Toys have shaped our relationship with product design in the wider world by changing what we require from many of the objects we use every day. 'In the age of plastic culture, why settle for the merely functional when a witty or pleasurable design will not only work well, but also be fun to use?' asks Phoenix (2006, 97).

Actual toys have come to have an effect on design of other artefacts as well: The design of contemporary toys is inspiring for creation of other product groups. According to Phoenix, the aesthetics familiar from toys lends itself to other consumer products which 'borrow from the language of toys to create increasingly playful and sculptural forms with an emphasis on the haptic qualities that want to make us touch and manipulate these objects just as if they were toys' (Phoenix, 2006, 11).

The material toy experience (which for the most part) has its starting point in a three-dimensional object which in some cases, extends beyond its physical being. Belk has pointed out that even contemporary mass-produced objects may be conceived to have 'magical' properties, from the capacity to protect their owners from harm to cure, to empower, to bring good luck (Belk, 1991 cited in Crozier 1994, 85).

An example follows: Guatemalan children believe that before you go to bed at night you tell one worry to each doll, put the dolls under your pillow, when you get up in the morning your worries are gone. The concept of the Guatemalan worry doll is nowadays available as a mass-produced toy¹¹⁰ that affords (because of its seriality) both collecting and (because of its mascot-like appearance) being carried along. The magical dimensions of a toy may not always translate to words, as one of the toying artists philosophizes:

KH: Does your making of art always start from that you have an object of the physical world, an artefact?

Interviewee: Because one object can include a whole world, I see physical entities as a part of an ideal world, also the world of feelings, or the one that does not have words. The physical might have features that are hard to put into words. A toy may be beyond language. (TA/kt)

Design theory acknowledges the many levels of meaning of objects: Meanings associated with objects can be cultural or subjective as well as lasting or temporary (Niinimäki, 2011, Koskijoki, 1997). Before turning to a brief analysis of the role of design culture as an environment of toy-related play performance, I would like to conclude this passage by noting that the understanding of the material are going through interesting lines of development: Although the physical materiality of playthings is considered highly

¹¹⁰ See <http://www.worrydoll.com/servlet/StoreFront>.

important, the age of the ludic turn also demonstrates a *dematerialisation* of culture in terms of playthings (Heljakka, 2012). For example, players of the Habbo Hotel game purchase virtual artefacts to decorate virtual living spaces or to give them to others as gifts (Korkee, 2009). The purchasing of virtual objects for these online 'doll houses' mostly means a way of playing or gaming for the players. At the same time it shows, how the understanding of the concept of *play material* has expanded beyond the physical. Moreover, digital game characters are extensively transforming into physical objects in the name of re-materialization. Toy culture in its current state recognizes both Angry Birds plush toys and Pacman action figures, which both represent characters originating in the world of digital gaming.



Designer Sato Hisao's toys, 2011.

Design culture

A toy is not a sketch. A toy is not a statue. A toy requires interaction. To simply make a three-dimensional, unmoving object requires no effort and is a disservice to the medium. We expect your toys to function as such, lest they be relegated to the ever-expanding pile of mediocrity lining the shelves of the uninformed, unimaginative and uninteresting (Super 7 The Book, 2005, 6).

According to Kankainen, one of the directions in designing emotionally rich products is to create a *feeling of flow* in the product (2003, 153, my accentuation). To ensure that a product enables the creation of a flowing experience, a designer must build a scenario for the use of the product, a solution space (e.g. Dorst, 2006) and test it. As Manzini sees it, the designer is not simply a problem-solver but an intellectual being able to link ‘the possible with the hoped-for in visible form’ (Manzini, 1994). When discussing the design work behind mass-marketed toys, the ‘hoped-for’ is usually not articulated by the future players of the product. Rather, by employing the *Zeitgeist*, or in other words, by examining trends and developments in various areas of culture, a toy designer may come across ideas about what the world wants to play with at that moment and then aim at designing play affordances into the toy-to-be that aim at the wished for activities.

The affordances, as noted, are present in the toy only as suggestions and not direct guidelines for its use. As Fleming notes ‘toys are infinitely adaptable and can take on meanings other than those they originally came with, and indeed any object can temporarily become a toy’ (1996, 67). On the contrary, also the designer is free to use his/her imagination in order to create play affordances. A toy can be designed ‘out of anything’. In other words, a toy designer may use whatever source of inspiration in order to come up with an idea for a new toy. Toy designers are also trendsetters in terms of design culture as other material objects imitate ‘toyishness’. Ultimately, it is the success of commercialization of the toy that will determine its fate.

As stated previously, the *homo ludens* is also *homo narrans*. Storytelling relates in many ways to toys seen from the viewpoint of media. Drawing on earlier fictions or creating novel narratives is an important part of the work of the toy designer. First, there is the story the designer wants to communicate through the character. Second, there are the stories the players come to connect with the toys. Often these stories become intertwined, even enriched by elements from the players, own life. Toys can be ‘read’ as independent stories. As noted by Selander, toys should thus be considered in relation with other stories or as part of other narratives. In this light, toys may be viewed as narrative artefacts (Selander, 1999), both intertextual and intermedial in their nature. In the playground of design culture, the toy designer can then be considered as both an architect and a mediator of rich narratives.

Creating a toy out of e.g. a character license may seem like a short-cut to designing a potentially popular toy, but as we have seen, sometimes the toy comes first and the (character) license follows. Moreover, toy novelties that rely on an abstract aesthetic are more challenging to market as compared to ‘toys with a face’, described in the previous chapters. All in all, the design culture that surrounds toy designers themselves is not an easy area to operate in, for as Pauli and Colombo describe:

The designer himself will have to be highly creative in order to invent a game or a toy that is easy to understand, simple to use, that is enjoyable and attractively colourful (but not banal, because banality is not conducive to knowledge). It must be an object that cannot cause harm, and it should be understandable by adults as well. The game or toy has to stimulate the imagination, and it should not be totally conclusive or finished (unlike certain perfect reproductions of real cars), a characteristic which prevents user participation. In this case the object becomes a perfect object, worthy just of admiration (Pauli & Colombo, 2005).

The processes of designing vary according to the type of toy being designed. As literature on character toy design is scarce, I will turn to interviews with designers gathered from designer toy magazines and my own interviews with toy designers. Toy design as a process in the realm of designer toys demonstrates that understanding the many levels of the design process is required. It goes as follows:

Sketch, then a sculpt in clay and then you paint the sculpture and at some point that has to go into a 3D model. All artists do not do the sculpting. Then it's ready to make the tooling. At some point the packaging design comes in. Quintessential part of the process - how the customers think of the packaging or do they ever even open it? (TD/Is)

Toy designer James Jarvis explains the process involved in designing, making and marketing his vinyl toy:

When I design toys, I always begin by making a series of very precise technical drawings and ‘turnarounds’ based on my freehand drawings. A sculpt of the toy, based on the turnarounds, is made out of clay, photographed and emailed to me for feedback. Once the sculpt is approved, a wax version is made, which is more refined. [...] the wax sculpt defines the look of the finished toy (“Work in progress”. James Jarvis YOD Toy. *Creative Review*, November 2007, 44-45).

Designers appear to use a wide variety of sources of inspiration. The moment of ‘heureka’ can happen anywhere and can stem from anything:

Sometimes it [an idea] can come from driving in a car, sometimes looking for names to get an idea. Watching people play and thinking, 'oh yeah'. Seeing how people interact, what they get engaged with. (TD/tg)

In sum, thematically toy design is clearly influenced by everyday life. Popular culture in general may spark an idea for a new character toy. The process of making a 3D toy prototype of a vinyl toy; a doll or an action figure includes sketching, sculpting, painting and tooling to name a few stages of the process. The design processes for a soft toy are similar except for the painting. All in all, designing a toy character requires both skills to formulate both visual and tactile experiences. Furthermore, it is advantageous for the toy designer to possess the capacity to tell stories that can be built on to create product universes beyond the product categories of toys.

As a closing note to this paragraph I would like to add that not only do toys draw inspiration from other areas of culture, but inspire other fields of design work and therefore design brands outside of the sphere of play, too. Toys have become an area of designer culture that interests designers of utensils as well. Examples of companies that are not part of the toy industry follow: Swedish clothing design brand Acne has launched its own series of toys that are directed to children, but clearly speak out to the design-conscious adult. Furthermore, toys are produced by companies that are not necessarily known for their expertise in designing playthings: Ikea and H&M both have their in-house toy lines.¹¹¹

Fan culture

Again, let me say it, fandom is the future. ... fandom is everywhere all the time, a central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society (Jenkins, 2007, 361).

We are the superfans. We are the collectors, the variation hunters. We stand in lines and we camp out. We get up in the middle of the night to bid on auctions. We pay attention to the details. We are you (Super 7 brochure, 2011).

¹¹¹ Some of the toys produced by these companies have clearly borrowed some parts of their aesthetics from what has influenced industrial design of toys i.e. the cute as in reference to Japanese 'looks' promoted in manga and anime. In fact, one may see direct similarities between the Uglydoll characters and the toys in the H&M home catalogue (Winter 2012–2013), and between the shaped animal pillows of design collective Areaware and the 'toys' marketed as children's interior design articles in the H&M Spring catalogue '13.



Rotofugi in Chicago is a toy store that sells "toys, art and other unique stuff for you", 2012.

Fetishism in connection with artefacts does not only reveal hierarchical relationships with people, but is capable of creating social groups (Ilmonen, 2007, 268). As Crozier notes, an important part of a person's identity is his or her association with actual or imagined groups in society (1994, 112).

When discussing players with similar affections to certain toys, it is justifiable to talk about toy fandom. A fan can be seen as a "keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement" and thence to indicate "an enthusiast for a particular person or thing" (OED cited in Ivy, 2010, 3).

Koichi Iwabuchi follows Raymond Williams' famous saying in developing his argument about fans: Iwabuchi (2010) says: "There are in fact no fans. There are only ways of seeing people as fans" (as compared to Williams famous saying "There are in fact no masses. There are only ways of seeing people as masses"¹¹²). In the context of my thesis as in popular culture in general, fans are described as groupings of people who share a common interest, the object of fandom. Toy fans, as indicated in the brochure text of toy store Super 7, are the 'collectors and the variation hunters'. They are, in fact much more than that, as will be shown further in the thesis, namely in Chapter 10.

¹¹² See *Culture and Society*, Catto & Windus (1958) London, 289.

As suggested in the Monster Factory catalogue for example, there might not be a prototypical person buying the Monster toys, but common threads can still be detected in monster fans: 'They are creative, they love collecting characters, and they appreciate good design'.¹¹³ However, toy fans share a common trait, as they are all not only fans, but also (potential) *players*.

Urpo Kovala argues that fan studies focus on the audience – its composition, activities, motivations, meanings and the audience's own perspective (2003, 193). As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington note, recent fan studies have explored the intrapersonal pleasures and motivations among fans. On a macro level, 'contemporary research on fans acknowledges that fans' readings, tastes, and practices are tied to wider social structures' (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007a, 8).

In the context of studies in toy fandom, what is of interest besides analysing the common object of desire – the toy – and the fan base – the audience (of players) – is the consumption behaviour of the toy fans, i.e. their patterns of play with the toy. As play is a 'fannish' activity and thus, a form of *active* behaviour, we need to elaborate further on what happens when fans play with their toys.

Toys in terms of fan culture are often objects with cult status. According to Kaarina Nikunen (2009, 60, 62) a cult is linked with a certain subcultural attitude towards cultural production. Cult fandom means organizing around specific texts that are usually linked with genres such as fantasy.

As Nikunen elaborates, in the core of cult fandom are not, however, the meanings conveyed in the text, but rather, the activities (amateurism, group work and sharing) that are conducted in this special field of consumer media culture, where the mainstream is constantly mixed with the alternative (2009, 67). Media scholar Matt Hills suggests that fandom can actually be seen as a form of cultural creativity, and therefore as a form of play (Hills, 2002, 90).

Following Jenkins, Sihvonen claims that at the core of fandom are always fannish activities, which need a collective of usually like-minded individuals to be brought about and given some social significance (Sihvonen, 2009, 126). Hills argues that it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play. He suggests that what is distinctive about this view of play is that '(i) it deals with the emotional attachment of the fan and (ii) it suggests that play is not always caught up in pre-established 'boundedness' or set of cultural boundaries, but may instead imaginatively create its own set of boundaries and its own auto-'context' (2002, 112).

¹¹³See Monster Factory Spring catalogue 2013.

Fan objects are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation, and from which they create meaning in the process of reading... The process of reading, however, is no simple realization of prepacked meanings controlled by the author, but rather an interaction in which the structures and figures of the text collide with the reader's (subjective) knowledge, experiences, and expectations, all in turn formed, may we add, in an intertextual field. In this process of dialogue between text and reader, meaning is created as the reader "concretizes" the text (Sandvoss, 2007, 22, 28).

As explained by Sandvoss, objects of fandom may be seen as texts that suggest ways of reading, but allow space for interpretations based on the fan/reader's previous knowledge, experience and expectations. Meanings are negotiated within this intertextual space. When translated into the language of toys, this refers to what has been discussed before in terms of toy design: The designer may e.g. give clues about the personality of the toy character, but ultimately, it is the player who makes the decision on how to utilize the toy object in play (e.g. develop the narrative further).

Toy play, considered from the viewpoint of fan culture, can be discussed among other things, from the premise of 'media play'. This means that contemporary media texts nowadays inspire play in various ways. Children can be inspired into play after watching films (Bromley, 1996), but they will eventually use the content as material in their ludic activities as they please. For example, as Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris note, 'doll play is notoriously interactive and multivalent; little girls and boys are seldom simply passive consumers of marketing messages' (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 64).

According to a study reported by Singer and Singer, children in fact use media to symbolize their own perception of themselves by selecting particular media content and integrating these into their play. Boys especially incorporated into their fantasy stories and drawings elements of action/adventure films, computer games, documentary programs, and mythical stories where men are heroes (Singer & Singer, 2007, 34). According to Saarikoski, the narrative of play 'comes off' the original text as it is improvised further (2008, 82). The findings of one of the researchers interviewed for my study support these ideas:

Children take themes from reality into their play in a holistic way. Media is of course one of the areas. But not in such a way that children would take everything that the media offers, but distil – take the things that interest them and their own

stories, even in a unconscious way. [...] one need not to worry about that media would impoverish [contemporary play in childhood]. (TR/rk)

Children's play, then, does not differ much from the activities related to fandom: Prominent media scholar Henry Jenkins sees fans themselves as rebellious children who ignore the rules and for whom reading media texts and artifacts means *to play with them* (2006, 39, accentuation mine). This statement also carries similarities with play practices in the realm of digital gaming, where the players are not necessarily playing by the rules, but *with* them (Sotamaa, 2009).

As my research material suggests, many toy designers are toy fans themselves. As claimed before, a toy may take its thematic inspiration from 'anything'. Popular media characters may also function as a source of meaning, when inspirational material is sought for in developing a toy. Public figures and icons of pop culture provide a rich, inspirational realm as two of my interviewees describe:

So [making toy portraits] of public figures is in a way different. As they are in a way already toys themselves. They have this media personality and that special image. And how the media treats them. So they are toys themselves, in a way. (AT/mk)

I take icons of popular culture and make them my own. (TD/Is)

According to Unt, 'play is a civilising process not only on a subjective level, but on the social level' (2012, 111). Toys, writes Kline, are objects that come to acquire symbolic content and meaning in a social context (1993, 143). During a certain age in the child's development, says Miller, 'artefacts become its principal means of articulating feelings and desires' (1987, 99). Kids, claims Kline, 'are extremely peer orientated, subject to the collective whims of their immediate cultural environment, which is constantly changing shape and focus' (1993, 224). In other words, a toy is not 'only' a thing to play with and enjoy. It is a resource for communication (Selander, 1999, 39).

In the context of fan studies, as Helena Saarikoski suggests, different fandoms may be thought of as societies of play that produce imaginary worlds and at the same time create ways of producing these fantasies (Saarikoski, 2008, 79). As Smith points out, fantasy play is influenced by the play materials and the play companions available (Smith, 2010, 165). As fan play is, by its very nature, playing with a common fantasy, it needs a group of like-minded players in order to be manifested properly. Also, a toy fan may through his/her active (and creative) play become the object of fandom him/

herself, in other words a 'superfan' acknowledged and appreciated by others who share the common (play)ground.

Hakkarainen argues that in order to reproduce adult relationships in the play of children, other children are needed. My suggestion is exactly the opposite in the framework of adult toy play: In order to produce play acts traditionally thought of as childish, the adult needs other, like-minded adults as fellow players. Other players are needed for not only the imaginative playing that happens with and around a specific toy character, but also in order to get support and kudos from the fan community. This may be important for the toy designer as well, as illustrated in one my interview excerpts:

KH: What do you take into consideration when you start to design a toy?

Interviewee: Branding, making sure that I get respect from the community. Never abandon the hard core vinyl toy addict in your thinking. (TD/Is)

The adult toy play phenomenon is for a large part rooted in subcultures and as such, represents in many ways the fannish activities as described above. It is interesting to note here that toy fandom does not limit itself to the consumer/players, but that toy designers may be, and in most cases seem to be, fans of toys and even other toy designers. This communicates the idea of adult toy players as not only object players, but *social object players*, paralleling the thinking of Power (2000).

KH: How do you define an "experience"?

Interviewee: - In toys I would say the social aspect of the toys. You meet cool artists with all different things in this industry. You get to work with multi-talented people. (TD/Is)



Craft-kit robot characters by Magnote are the latest addition to the action figure brigade, 2013.



Kidrobot store window in Miami, 2010.

Visual culture

X went to see the doll house exhibition many times.

-"I could not get enough from looking at it."

(Ojanen, 2012, 6)

Visual culture enters our life at an early stage: Within the first three months of life, an infant learns to track objects in its field of vision (Pesce, 2000, 30). Visuality can concern how we see everyday objects and people, not just the things we think of as visual texts (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Walker and Chaplin define visuality as vision socialized (1997). In the thinking of visual cultural theorist, Gillian Rose, visuality 'refers to ways in which vision is constructed in various ways' (2001, 6). What is seen is therefore not innocent in itself, but something that requires a critical inspection. Berger refers to the ways of seeing as not looking at just one thing, but a relation between things and ourselves (1972, 9). These thoughts open up my next area of interest in analysing the cultural spaces of play and performance, this time from the perspective of what is perceived visually when consuming the toy as a visual entity. Anthropologist Jean-Pierre Rossie sees toys as a part of visual communication (1996, 34). Therefore, it is vital to understand the significance of both visual design and various levels of aesthetic appreciation in reference to toys.

'That which can be seen and which possesses communicative or functional intent is a good definition of design', says Barnard (1998, 15). The outcomes of toy design work as *visually perceivable* and on the other hand, *communicational objects* may then be understood as a part of visual culture. In the academic world design studies have, however, been separated from the discipline of visual culture. In the context of this thesis, I will follow this division by discussing the visual and the 'designerly' with slightly different accentuation. In my view, what is designed and produced in terms of material products always represents something visual, whereas visual culture refers more broadly to the realm of how the visible is perceived, consumed and interpreted by the participants of culture. Visual culture strives for, according to Barnard (1998) an 'intentional aesthetic effect'. This effect is a central dimension of contemporary toys.

The outcomes of design work are often perceivable through vision, and thus play, an important part of how human culture is visually experienced. Walker and Chaplin have noted that 'the production of visual culture depends upon human labour both physical and mental'. This includes tasks such as 'imaginative thinking, construction, invention and play as well as routine tasks' (1997, 68).

A toy (animated or not) is a kind of picture (Tiffany, 2000, 21). As we have seen, the toy design process often begins by sketching – creating an initial image of the toy-to-be. So, the toy designer is in most cases capable of graphic communication, if not visual artistry. The adult toy player, then again, also appreciates the visual aspect of toys highly. In fact, what can be visually experienced has a central role in the potential actualization of the wow experience, the very first encounter with the toy, as the player may see the plaything in a shop window, lifestyle magazine, blog, fan website or photo management service, etc.

Toys are often used as decorative items that communicate a quirky youthful playfulness associated with creativity and style. Interior decoration magazines have during the time of the research featured a growing number of toys as artefacts of interest not only relating to nurseries, but also to tell tales of an understanding of the visual and material manifestations of the ludic age. In many cases, the depicted playthings represent categories of dolls, soft toys and figurines.

Robins argues correctly that new visual media have progressively expanded the field of vision (1996, 21). I would, however, argue against his claim that the distance between the space of the image and the world of objects is growing (1996, 34). In the realm of toys, development seems to follow an opposite path as the playgrounds of the material and the digital – the physical toy objects and its pictorial representations – seem to co-exist happily, feeding on each other in a way.

Lifestyle magazines exposing celebrities shopping for toys may have a significant impact on raising the popularity of one particularly popular toy among adults. According to the *Uglydoll* press material from 2012, celebrity personalities such as Kim Kardashian and fashion blogger Tavi have been spotted with Uglydoll characters. This, again, illustrates how toy culture comes close to celebrity culture through visual communicative media. My presumption is that seeing new toys in unexpected contexts may result in interest in these particular toys from potential players.

Furthermore, a term familiar from the theory of visual media – the *gaze*¹⁴ – is an important factor in toy play: As two toy stories collected during my Adult Toy Day in 2009 show: One of my interviewees was impressed when she received the doll and did not allow her little sister to touch it: “She was allowed to give the doll a long look, but not to touch it” (ATD/rj). Another interviewee says:

¹⁴ The ‘gaze’ describes the act of looking. The exploration of this concept began as the study of the objectification of women in visual texts (see e.g. Mulvey, Laura (1975) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*). The gaze has since been used in describing the various acts of intensive looking, often in connection with ‘objects of desire’ such as a picturesque view in terms of the tourist gaze etc. In my suggestion, the gaze is also an important factor in how adults act when they have an interest in a toy.

The doll now sits on the living room sofa. The small ones’ are not allowed to touch it. (ATD/us)

Already in a publication from the early 1970s, Antonia Fraser, author of *The History of Toys*, notes the idea originally proposed by Mademoiselle Rabecq-Maillard, of the toy as a site of contemplation – one that would not necessarily, be consumed by other senses than the eye. She writes:

Mme Rabecq-Maillard (writer of ‘Histoire du Jouet’) refers to the early richly made Dutch dolls’ houses as ‘toys of contemplation’, a phrase which seems to hit off their peculiar role exactly, and underlines the possibility of a visual toy, gratifying the eyes, in contrast to sensory one, which can actually be used in play (Fraser, 1972, 83).

“My nephews always want to look at my coil-spring robots, but first and foremost they are decorative items” (P.S in Friman, 2009, 23). For some toy players, however, to look at *one* toy is not enough. Instead, to ensure maximal gratification, this visual enthusiast buys many pieces of exactly the same toy. Toy enthusiast who collects designer toys may buy duplicates for playing with one and keeping the other one in its package, untouched further re-selling or trading possibilities in mind. In this way vision comes to be more significant for the toy experience than touch. Packaging plays an important part in adult toy cultures in general. For the toy collector, they may have monetary value, for the visually-oriented fan the package may be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities: “It is important that the toys come with the package. [...] Packaging are in themselves works of art and inspire me” (P.S in Friman, 2009, 23).

Toys are in the most challenged packages in the entire merchandising world. Underpacking a product can have disastrous effects at retail. Toy industry packages are expected to go beyond merely carrying the product to the consumers (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 280).



From the perspective of the toy company, the package enables the possibility to communicate marketing messages. Also, they may add secrecy around the toy in a so-called 'blind box' (see image of Kidrobot toy packaging above). Further, the box may be used to expand the back story of the toy in verbal and visual ways. As we have seen, the toy owner, again, may either see the packaging as added (visual or monetary) value, or as protection for a much valued toy.

In a perhaps more drastic example, the adult purposely excludes the possibility to play with the toy altogether, by claiming: "The toy user is not a user of things. Vinyl toys are display pieces, they should look amazing, nothing else" (TD/Is). Aesthetics attracts some toy aficionados even more than the possibility of physical manipulation:

KH: When you buy yourself a toy, what attracts you to it?

Interviewee: Probably its form. [...] Form or colour. Not that I would play with it, because I buy it like some beautiful sugar bowl from Arabia. (TR/rk)

'To look amazing', in other words, means that the toy has an aesthetic value so high that it exceeds, for example its manipulable, playful quality. Limiting oneself only to enjoy the toy visually, does not exclude this form of engagement from play, however. Here, it may be another form of play that gravitates more towards an internal dialogue with the toy that does not require actual manipulation. The significance of toy displays will be discussed further in Chapter 10, where 'the displaying player' is elaborated in more detail under the profile of 'The Productive, Creative (Dis-)Player'.

Moreover, to 'look amazing' may mean that the toy expresses a never-seen-before aesthetic that reaches the magical wow-effect. Besides 'prettyness', novelty is crucial for the wowness of visual spectacles, like in the trend-conscious (or even avant-garde) field of designer toys, as shown by the excerpts from my interviews with toy designers.

Novelty value, aesthetics is also important. I like pretty things. (TD/bk)

...with this hyper [designer] toys, it's really the society of a spectacle here and the objects you acquire make who you are even here more so than elsewhere [...] (TD/rl)

According to many sources used in this research, what has significantly influenced toy design, and thus contributed to 'society of spectacle' of the past decennia, is the 'Japanese look'. Dan Fleming writes: 'What the really major commercial successes in recent years have had in common has been an unobvious blending of American and Japanese characteristics' (Fleming, 1996, 19). Jenkins agrees that American popular culture is increasingly responding to Asian influences (2007b, 25). A much recognized and already familiar example of design work follows:

Hello Kitty is an astonishing piece of design work. She's made up of just a few solid black lines and dashes, but she's spawned some 50,000 products and been at the forefront of stylish consumer products for all ages for more than three decades (Phillips, 2010, 60).

According to Anne Allison (2006, 1–2), the Japanese are better and more imaginative in their edginess, storytelling and complex characterizations in products of popular visual culture. The appeal of Japanese characters is, says Allison, distinctly non-American, known for its cuteness and electric powers such as the Pokémon phenomenon. At the time of writing the thesis, the 'Japanese look' very much prevails in toy culture. From the perspective of dolls, action figures and soft toys the cute-but-odd aesthetic is what adults, alongside children, are playing with today.



The "Worm" character from the Computer Virus Dolls series designed by Drew Oliver, 2013.

Digital/social media culture

KH: What kind of toys would you design if anything was possible?

Interviewee: Well I think I would, I don't know what the toy would be like, but I know what I wanted to accomplish. It would be to make it possible for groups of people to play and interact together really satisfyingly. Like that object would create sort of a connection between them and I don't mean just the Internet. You know, connection between lot's of people and that it would be something that would really create strong communication in a playful way and interesting, I don't know what kind of a toy or game it would be, but I'll think about that. (TD/dk)

There is a persistent way of thinking that playing (and playing games) today means playing alone (solitary play). According to a Finnish study about the use of time conducted by the Bureau of Statistics (Ajankäyttötutkimus, 2011) in Finland, over 9 percent of people play alone and 4% in the company of others. In the 1980s both groups accounted for over 5% each.

Sutton-Smith says that toys decrease the sociability of play. He explains this by describing a situation where a child is left with other children. In this case the child

is more likely to play with the other children than a toy object (1986, 39). It seems that adult play on the other hand, is more likely to happen in the company of a toy. This ludic engagement may be manifested either as solitary object play or as social object play shared with other like-minded toy players. As we have seen, it is a benefit for the toy to belong to an already narrated fantasy world of which adult players may, as toy fans, become the sharers and communicators. However, what my research material shows, is that a complex story world is not a pre-requisite for an adult to bond with and play with a toy character. In some cases, the adult toy player may even own a license-related toy without any knowledge of the (industry narrated) story world behind it. As stated earlier, toys are communicative artefacts. In other words first, they enable communication between the player and the toy. Second, they may function as tools for socialization and thus, enable intra-personal communication. Adults do not share *one* toy, but the interest toward a specific type of a toy or a toy category.

"Sharers": Individuals who believe in the philosophy, "my toys are your toys and your toys are my toys." Since they often interact with several other individuals, in a short time it is impossible to know who really enjoys what. Not surprisingly, most of the toys are located at the sharers house (Rinker, 1991, 6).

In the quote above, Rinker writes of 'Sharers' in toy cultures. Perhaps in today's world the sharing comes mostly to mean a shared fantasy of the toy, not sharing of the physical toy object itself.

The first signs of adult type behavior in the child show in the object relations. Through play material, children make contact with each other, talk with each other, do not decline the making of contact from others (onlooker), want to play next to each other (parallel play) and follow the play of others with interest (Hännikäinen, 1991, 104). The study at hand shows exactly the same logic being followed in adult toy play, although the parallel play does not necessarily appear in parallel physically, but virtually as enabled by the using of social media services. One example of this is the photoplay of adult toy players on Flickr, which will be elaborated on in more detail on in Chapter 10.

Therefore, adult toy play seems to be similar to the social toy play of children. As Kline notes: 'Toys not only communicate to children but children communicate to others through and about their toys' (1999, 220). According to Smith, the majority of pretend play is social (2010, 15). The plaything has value, if it encourages to social play, says Eckert. He claims that toys are good if they enable children to role-play, socialize or cooperate with each other (1999, 94).

The development of new media technologies has allowed the sphere of play to expand from the material to the virtual spaces. The Internet is generally seen as a focal point for groups of people with similar interests. As convergence culture enables new forms of participation and collaboration between i.e. fan groups (Jenkins 2006, 256), a playful attitude and engagement towards culture has become even more perceivable.¹¹⁵

Brenda Danet (2001, 7–8) sees cyberspace as a site for play because it affords all kinds of activities related to pretending and make believe, both familiar in terminology defining different forms of play. Digital media scholars Saarikoski et al support this view by arguing that play, or rather, playfulness, has been one of the most important factors in tempting people to online activities (2009, 261–262).¹¹⁶

Children of today are ‘digital natives’. What drives the toy business today when comparing it to the situation ten years ago?

Chris Byrne (toy industry expert): Certainly the rise of technology, the availability of technology and the fragmentation of the industry into consumer electronics, communications and, of course, the Internet, have transformed the industry on a global basis. Interestingly enough, the archetypal play patterns remain unchanged, though the media through which they are experienced have become more contemporary (Das Spielzeug, Messe Extra 2/09, 26).

It is evident that the emergence of both virtual worlds and social media has affected the development of play culture on a general level. Myers says that the popularity of social software and social games has been one of the major success stories in the gaming industry over the past decade (Myers, 2010, 129). In Seiter’s view, children look to computers for entertainment. Today it is recognized that the “stickiest” websites are game sites (2007, 16, 90). What happens online is according to Sutton-Smith informal social play (1997, 4).

The digital connections that enable the functioning of virtual communities build up networked cultures that cannot be foreseen when exploring contemporary toy play. Toy fans use new media for constructing and maintaining their communities and social

¹¹⁵ A survey by German Youth Institute “Deutsches Jugendinstitut” (“Growing up in Germany: Everyday Worlds” - available in German) demonstrates that digital socialization is already completed at age 15, see *Play it! The Global Toy Magazine*, Spielwarenmesse International Toy fair Nürnberg publication 30.01–04.02.2013.

¹¹⁶ In some cases online environments have also become the sites for more serious forms of play. For instance, collectors of TY’s Beanie Babies set up websites to sell and trade the toys in the late 1990s at a time when the ‘Internet was starting to really explode’ (See the comment made by Becky Estenssoro, author of several Beanie collectors’ guides in Walsh, 2005, 271).

networks represent one of the most typical realms. In the light of these thoughts I would like to suggest that the Internet represents one aspect of the contemporary playgrounds for adults which enhance the analogue toy play in various ways.

Virtual worlds have become an important extension to our environment. The online communities, where individuals may interact with others by engaging in various activities do not only afford communication, but ‘an actual (though virtual) location within which individuals can act through their alter egos (avatars)’ (Kalay and Marks, 2001).

Digital media scholar Sherry Turkle sees the computer as a ‘second self, a mirror of mind’. But new devices come to mean a ‘new state of the self, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into the existence through technology’ (Turkle, 2011, 16). The Internet has become a mirror to us (Keen, 2007, 7) As Pesce already noted in 2000, ‘the insubstantial world of cyberspace and the world of real objects are beginning to intersect and influence one another’ (2000, 232). The remix, again, is the very nature of the digital, articulates Keen (2007, 24).

New media cultures are connected cultures (Marshall, 2004, 43). According to Bell (2008, 2) a virtual world is ‘a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers.’ Virtual worlds also offer an awareness of space, distance and co-existence of other participants found in real life spaces giving a sense of environment’ (ibid.). In virtual worlds, we are able to toy with digital avatars. In the ‘real’, corporeal world it is the toy what may become an avatar, which again may return to online environments as a photographed representation of itself and at the same time, as the alter ego of the player.

In 2009, I created a Facebook account for my first Blythe doll, Kiki. After a few postings of photos and connecting with friends and relatives originating from my personal account, I stopped making announcements on behalf of Kiki. The site dedicated for my doll’s virtual self remains and perhaps one day, will be re-activated again. In the meantime, the doll’s social life limits itself to myself and the other toys that currently inhabit my home.

I will return to the notion of the *avatarial toy* in Chapter 9, where I discuss further a toy’s capability to function as a ‘mini-me’, an alter ego for the player. What is important to realize in the context of this subchapter, is that adult toy play manifests itself as a social phenomenon and that it uses virtual environments, online communities and social media as spaces of play and performance. As Bell writes, ‘people are central to virtual worlds. Participants communicate and interact with each other and the environment’ (2008, 2).

This playfulness of digital and social media culture not only means that activities such as gaming stand for a significant part of play activities online, but also that the cultures of toy play have expanded online through several interest groups such as representatives of the toy industry, independent toy designers/companies and most interestingly, the players themselves. The playscape of today thus spreads across virtual and corporeal playgrounds.

Interaction with objects results in socialization and social relationships may define how we approach and manipulate artefacts. Computer-mediated communication adds another realm to the arenas where adult toy play happens. It functions in a multitude of ways in establishing and sustaining relationships of adult toy enthusiasts. It may be the starting point for toy-related activities that later on manifest as something carried out in the physical world. An example follows:

When organized in Finland, some one hundred men in their 20s gathered in a Pony-meeting. The common denominator for the men is the love for the My Little Pony animated series *Friendship is Magic*. The men discuss ponies, draw ponies and watch pony animations. They have acquainted themselves with the series on the Internet, through which the series has captured men globally (von Herzen, 2012, C1).

In the current age, the digital space has taken over as a primary site of interaction between different cultural groups such as fans. For example in Finland, the Internet has spread the hobby horse hobby around the country (Nessi, 2011). Toying with a very traditional plaything thus exceeds the limits between the material and digital. The Internet is a hobbyist's treasure trove as there one can get information, advice and guidelines on how to develop the toy-related activities in many ways (Ojanen, 2012, 7).

Hobbyists, for instance, share ideas about recycling materials to decorate the doll houses in their blogs.¹¹⁷ The digital space as a place for play performance does not limit itself to exchanges of information on how to manipulate toys in most ideal ways. Perhaps more importantly, it functions as a site for presenting the continued toy stories of toy players, meaning the visual and verbal narratives that either continue the stories originally begun by the toy designers, or on the other hand present completely new narratives as developed by the players. Long says that digital storytelling is inherently interactive (2007, 147). The possibility of telling their own stories about the adventures of the toy, offered to toy players by digital media, seems to be one of the most important features in contemporary toy cultures of today. The world of toys today is often extended in social media, the toy stories continued in various textual and pictorial forms.

Some toy companies have noticed this quality and launched products that extend the actual toy object towards new media by offering possibilities to get access to further

¹¹⁷ See Walamies, 2011, 36, also www.nukketalovuodatus.net.

narratives related to the toy through codes or passwords in the Internet. The Internet is altering, stimulating, and broadening the market for children's toys, and fuelled by and sustained via the Web, notes Seiter (2007, 83). This holds true for adult toy play as well, although adults may not necessarily use the same channels such as websites or social media services as children do in connection with their toy-related activities.

As stated earlier, 'play is changing media and media is changing play' (Jenkins, 2010). Somewhat surprisingly, famous play scholar Karl Groos already saw in the very dawn of the 1900s what is important in bringing people together in the name of social play: "To establish relationships marked with good fellowship, both children and adults turn to social play that extends from ordinary chat to mutual adornment of soul-stirring spectacles", as he wrote in his *The Play of Man* (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 211, 213, 221). New technologies are often considered as cold and uninviting, especially considering childhood and children's play. However, contemporary toys demonstrate that technology becomes a part of human experience at an early age. According to Ruckenstein, new technologies may cause concerns, but as media they do not limit children's play or imagination (TR/mrII). What 'new' media and digital, social culture seem to do for adult toy play in particular, is to bring the players out of their 'toy closets' and into the light of the platforms that social media provides. Moreover, it allows the players not only to connect with the like-minded, but to develop narratives of their toys in a wide variety of visual, verbal, even audiovisual and animated ways. There has been an assumption that ever-improving technology replaces craft (Dormer, 1997, 3). If the various toy-related activities through the manipulation of materials are considered a 'craft', the developments as clarified above argue against the fear expressed by Dormer. The digital and the social media have not replaced materiality in toy cultures, but expanded these cultures in many, interesting ways.

Online, fandoms emerge rapidly: "Fans always have been early adapters of new media technologies; their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production", says Henry Jenkins (2006, 135, 142). The examples of how toy fans come together online are endless. Social online communities make it possible for the like-minded to come together to worship or despise a common interest: The Internet has, for example, produced an Anti-Barbie Club (Clark, 2007, 102).

News spread fast on toy-related websites, such as www.figures.com, which claims to communicate "All Toy & Action Figure News. All the Time." Independent toy artists use online applications equally to build up the anticipation before a new toy is launched, as demonstrated by an interview excerpt with James Jarvis: "To build up the hype around YOD we created a MySpace page for him."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ See myspace.com/gre atyod, See: Work in progress. James Jarvis YOD Toy. *Creative Review*, November 2007, 45.



As stated in the previous passages, adult toy play can be seen to manifest itself in different areas of cultures. Or, different cultural realms afford to be viewed as playgrounds of toy designers, fans and players. These may be seen as conceptual realms that allow the phenomenon of toy play to be explored on many levels and from different perspectives. In my understanding the topic of my study requires this multifaceted cultural analysis in order to be able to see the context. In sum, I have argued that the cultures of adult toy play may be contextualized conceptually in the realms of the following areas of culture: material culture, design culture, fan culture, visual culture and digital, social (media) culture. Without a doubt, in some cases these areas blend into each other with ease. Design culture is often the predecessor of material culture. What comes in many cases after that is a fan culture, which again, as illustrated, is also a digital and social media culture. Altogether, all of these areas of culture may be seen to employ visual methods and representations. Furthermore, as in the case of studying toys again, all these contexts can be said to be manifested in the larger domain of popular culture. By looking at culture in its various forms, it is possible to perceive and analyse the phenomenon from many angles. Overall, using more perspectives than just one affords a researcher to gain knowledge about toy play more holistically.



Brother, 2011

Chapter 7: Toys and spatiality

Play has temporal diversity as well as spatial diversity.
(Sutton-Smith, 1997, 6)

Play, leisure, recreation, flow, all are enmeshed in space and time. We need the psychological, as well as physical, space in which to play and the time and resources to effectively engage in it (Burghardt, 2005, 398).

We have now arrived at an understanding of adult toy play as a phenomenon that takes place in different cultures. By exploring these cultures it is easier for the researcher of toy play to understand that the phenomenon is a multifaceted one and needs to be analyzed on many levels. Looking at dimensions of contemporary culture affords us to gain new knowledge about adult toy play; how play is produced in culture, who are involved in this production and how play manifests both in our corporeal and virtual environments. The concept of affordance makes it possible to perceive the possibilities for action that the realms of culture suggest for the toy player of today. Also, how the cultures afford clues of the existence and formulations of adult play are of interest for the toy researcher.

This chapter deals with the spatial aspects of contemporary toy play. In the course of this chapter I will continue the discussion on affordances by turning from areas of culture to the conceptual realm of space. By space I mean the physical space ranging from the marketplace for toys to the intimate spaces of living environments to the more public playgrounds outside of the home. Furthermore, as toys are no longer artefacts that are kept in one place, I will elaborate on toy mobility and give examples of what is meant by the traveling toy in contemporary toy culture. Moreover, I will discuss play as a dynamic movement between the actual, physical sphere of play and the fantastic world of imaginative play. This is referred to with the term 'play space', acknowledging that play may take place outside and in parallel with of our physical reality. Lastly, I will discuss the digital dimensions of toy play happening in the 'doldoms of social media'.

Markets, spaces and toy categories: Comparisons between children and adults

Geographically speaking, contemporary adult toy cultures manifest as global phenomena. However, as the materials used for the research at hand are gathered only

on a horizontal axis stretching from the U.S.A. to Japan with Europe in the middle, too broad generalizations cannot be made about whether or not the phenomenon of adult doll play with what we have defined as contemporary playthings, exists outside of this hemisphere. Often, I refer to the ‘western societies’ but it needs to be acknowledged that toys, and mass-produced toys in particular, share an aesthetic that takes inspiration from both West and East (mostly Japan) as has been illustrated in previous chapters and as the following quote well describes:

Flat, colorful and rootless, the images of this popular subculture – the blank faced Hello Kitty, the mutant monster Godzilla, the giant alien Ultraman, the cat-shaped guardian robot Doraemon – line up in no particular order, like icons on a computer screen. This cavalcade of weightless images in turn reverberates with contemporary viewers worldwide: anime and manga have become global signifiers of cool (Ngai, 2005).

Manga and anime play an important part in cultural entertainment that is exported from Japan throughout the world. What Kelts notes, however, is that Japanese media is notably America-centered. America has a position as a role model for the post-war generation. On the other hand, Americans are interested in cultural products of the Japanese. Many Americans find in anime a vision of the future, a fresh way of telling stories and interpreting the world (2007, 4,7). Despite this two-way movement, some Japanese pop characters have made their way into the U.S. market as ‘deodorized’ versions.

Koichi Iwabuchi has identified this “deodorizing” of Japanese products for the American market as an increasingly deliberate strategy of Japanese companies seeking global exports (2004). However, although the Japanese aesthetic has come to signify ‘global coolness’ this does not necessarily mean that although the toys of the East and the West are similar (deodorized or not), they are played with in the same ways.

For example, according to some sources, the designer toy phenomenon has its origins in Hong Kong. As Port explains, ‘what began in 1996 with some handmade toys by two Chinese artists in Hong Kong has now spread west with collectors lining up for hours to buy the latest releases’ (Port, 2010, 3). Since its beginnings, designer toy culture has grown from a subculture into a more mainstream culture, as both the small, independent toy companies and the global toy giants seem to draw inspiration from both the aesthetics, materials and mechanics of designer toys. Perhaps it is exactly in this development where deodorization takes place.

The designer toy phenomenon also functions as a case study in connection with the categorization of toys. Nowadays, it is hard to draw a line between (what is) a doll, (what

is) an action figure or (what might be) a soft toy. A designer toy may in fact, encapsulate all of the three categories in one. We could then demarcate all of these toy types either as dolls or as I have been doing here, designer toys.

At the same time, it is hard to make a division between what is a children’s toy and what is perhaps more directed towards the adult audience. In today’s world, this may not be necessary from the player viewpoint, anyway. But seen from the perspective of the designer and the producer of a toy, it is more interesting to think about target ages and target groups in general, because this will inevitably affect where the toy will be displayed on the market place. When considering mass-produced toys, it is crucial to know by which companies the toys are marketed and how the retail sector will position the toys in the shop. This brings us to the following topic of discussion, namely the question of where toys are sold and bought.

Point of purchase

The marketplace is not merely the institution upon which we hang our economic survival, but a major source of meaning. The task of managing one’s personal place within the constant flux of fashion and personal styles can be a demanding yet enjoyable preoccupation (Kline, 1993. 29).

As a child my toy purchases happened, at best, in toy emporiums of the 1980s. I do not remember of visiting so many Finnish toy stores, but the trips to Stor & Liten in Stockholm were unforgettable. The legendary toy store in the Swedish capital was a place of a toy enthusiast’s pilgrimage – a place where my My Little Ponies could get some well-wanted accessories and maybe even some new pony friends. Another unforgettable venue was a Belgian hypermarket, which introduced me to the Strawberry Shortcake doll. Another favorite toy acquisition from yet another point of purchase.

The good ‘old toy stores’ such as Stor & Liten in Stockholm (as I remember it in its hayday) may have vanished from many countries because of negative developments in the economy and re-structuring of the business, but as most of us know, toys are still sold in actual physical points of purchase. In most European countries and in America toys are mainly bought in supermarkets (or ‘super chains’ like Toys’R’Us), in Germany the share of the specialist trade and the department stores is still relatively high (The Toy Traders Association Reports). Depending on the toy type, an adult buys his toys online or offline. Overall, it seems that the retail sector does not consider the adult to be a toy consumer at all, if one looks at how toys are displayed in e.g. many supermarkets.

Toys are often organized in the vicinity of children's areas selling infant clothing and accessories, whereas for example digital games are placed next to other technological products. The situation is slightly better for board games (many of which are clearly targeted at an adult audience), because the retail sector acknowledges that adults play board games too. This may have to do with the fact that traditional games in many cases come with guidelines on age appropriateness, whereas the only labelling on toys is the usual warning saying that the toy is not suitable for anyone who is younger than 3 years old, because of 'small parts'.

Unless the toy buying adult has same preferences in products than the contemporary child and as offered by the traditional mass-market salespoints, s/he needs to go elsewhere. As Budnitz notes, designer/urban toys can be hard to track down. "You won't find them in traditional venues," says Budnitz. "They are too unique to be carried at mass-market outlets".¹¹⁹ For example, the Monster Factory toys of Canadian origin 'have found themselves at home in local toy stores, quirky gift shops, even high-end Japanese department stores'.¹²⁰

This difficulty of tracking down often means that the toy enthusiast must do some 'googling' before going shopping for toys. Indeed, at the time of my long-term visit to San Francisco in spring 2009 I received the business card for Super 7, a toy store directed clearly towards a mature audience. The card stated literally their "secret location" on Post Street.¹²¹

"Boutique" toy stores that only stock urban vinyl blur the line between art gallery and shop. By exhibiting limited-edition toys along with paintings or custom pieces from the artists, these stores help to create a scene around the production of new work (Phoenix, 2006, 49).

When giving the shopping of designer toys another thought, it is possible to see that there might be a logical explanation for the difficult nature of the endeavour. Designer toys in general are often coveted items and the hunt for the toy is part of the pleasure of the overall experience of acquiring the toy. Even navigating to the 'secret locations' of adult favoured toy stores can be seen as an enthralling form of playful behavior.

¹¹⁹ See Gonzales, Isabel C. (2004) Urban toys, *Time*; 5/31/2004, Vol. 163 Issue 22, 84.

¹²⁰ See Monster Factory Spring catalogue 2013.

¹²¹ The store has since moved from this Japantown spot, find out more on <http://super7store.com/>.

The future of vinyl toys: becoming more mainstream but in doing that there is always going to be a subculture, protecting exclusivity, building hype around something that is difficult to get. Some level of exclusivity has to be maintained, it will flourish. (TD/Is)

During the time of research for this thesis I have frequently visited museum and lifestyle shops, acknowledged 'adult toy stores' such as Kidrobot and Giant robot, Toy Tokyo in New York, Rotofugi in Chicago and Playlounge in London. Although these visits have always led to some small purchases, my most coveted toy items such as my two Blythe dolls have found their way to me through web shops. One of my latest toy treasures was found on a visit a rather unconventional outlet for toys: The H&M clothing chain catalogue. This is another piece of evidence for the 'everywhereness' of toys. Household brands must have seen the relative ease of in making an 'anonymous' (i.e. without a pre-narrated story or even name attached to it) soft toy and started to produce playthings of their own.

Online selling is on the increase, especially in toys.¹²² In order to affect this development, the traditional offline retail sector would need to acknowledge that toys are for all ages and somehow make the buying of toys more attractive for adults. For adults, more than children, do not see the hypermarket as the only place for acquiring toys and again, they have wider possibilities to shop online.

Despite the growth in interest towards online toy purchases, we need to remember that not all purchases made by adults are made in the traditional retail sector. Mass-marketed toys may be bought from other markets as well, as the quotes illustrate:

I buy Lego both from flea markets and the store depending on my economical situation (V.V. in Friman, 2009, 24).

Auctions may be organized on one single type of toy, such as the Barbie doll (Avomaa, 2012, 32).

Today adults may find among souvenirs – when they choose to – many objects that suit the doll house (Lönnqvist, 1981, 63). As seen earlier, toy enthusiasts do not necessarily have to buy a completely new toy. Also, as Lönnqvist points out, one may find toys for his/her toys (different kinds of accessories) anywhere, often in the sphere of souvenirs.

¹²² See *Toys & Playthings*, April 2012, 7: "Achica. The Members only Luxury Lifestyle Store".

In fact, in many cases flea markets and the aforementioned auctions organized by e.g. hobbyist associations, may function as actual treasure troves for toys that are recycled from player to player and in that sense are pertained in the sphere of play and away from oblivion. These are the toys that maintain a *glow*, something that is valued and sustained by adult players in many ways as will be explained further on in the thesis. In a similar manner, when the toy fans and players come together at ‘cons’ (conventions), adult toy culture is preserved, enriched and cultivated.



Barbie dolls on a garden staircase in Cape Verde, 2011. Photographed by Mika Laurila.

Play environment

A *play environment* refers to the setting in which toys and games are enjoyed (Levy & Weingartner, 2003, 5). In terms of imaginative play, “to play is to create and then to inhabit a distinctive world of one’s own making”, says Thomas Henricks (2008, 159). In the following, I will briefly touch upon matters regarding the play environments mainly from the viewpoint of physical space. The idea is to compare the places where play takes place in childhood and at adult age in order to see, whether similarities and/or differences can be pointed out regarding these demographic groups of players. Theoretically, play can take place anywhere, but as Chudacoff points out, ‘the three main play settings for children have been and remain: nature (woods, fields, parks etc.), public spaces (chiefly the street and the playground), and the home (including the yard and indoor space)’ (2007, 4).

There is no embarrassment in a child’s play. Children enter the world and grown ups only do that when no one is watching. (TD/ss)

In practice, children play anywhere they can, even with toys – without embarrassment, as pointed out by one of my interviewees. Traditionally, children’s rooms are the traditional toy terrains that speak volumes about both the mass-consumption and the great variety of toys that exist in today’s world. Nurseries are the kingdoms of toys, as was well illustrated in the Toy Story films. Sometimes toys come out of these rooms and are scattered all around the living spaces of the child. Perhaps it is fruitful to compare a child’s room to a playground: As Henricks reminds, playgrounds are frequently marked off; players know that they have entered unusual terrain (Henricks, 2006, 130). In the nursery (of western societies) one expects to find a lot of toys.

In the 1970s, the average American child had not just a single doll, bear or truck, but well over ninety playthings scattered around the bedroom.¹²³ Today, this number must exceed hundreds of toys. One reason for the growing number of toys in children’s lives be that parents, grandparents and other adults in a child’s life may want to compensate for the lack of so-called quality time together by giving toys. Some are willing to blame the toy industry, as illustrated in the following quote:

“There’s this idea of having to keep children entertained,” says Tim Gill, play consultant and former director of the Children’s Play Council. “We’re too frightened to let them out, so we’ll buy them some stuff. It’s assuaging guilt. Toy manufacturers feed into that anxiety” (Birkøtt, 2006, 56).

But at the same time children’s mobility is becoming increasingly restricted for various reasons (Kytä, 2003, 11). The child, when restricted into the home environment, seems to spend more time with his/her toys than other children. A toy then becomes not only a tool for possible socialization but quite the contrary, a thing which aims at play happening in the safe environment of the home. The availability of toys or spaces of play, as Smith notes, show adults’ attitudes towards play in a given culture (Smith, 2010, 91). Also, the attitudes towards different gender show how the play is viewed in different cultures: Boys play has generally been seen to place itself outside of domestic life. Girls toys and play focus on the home and family life instead (Römpötti, 2012).

¹²³ See Kline, 1993, 147, orig. in H. Rheingold and K.V. Cook, “The Content of Boys’ and Girls’ Rooms as an Index of Parents Behavior”, *Child Development*, 46, 1975, 459-463.

Brian Sutton-Smith writes of the toy as a *solitary object* – a thing that once given to the child, keeps him/her busy and not disturbing the adult. Smith agrees as he writes that play is seen as a way of getting children out of an adult's way and keeping them occupied (Smith, 2010, 196). In a way, I see the solitary object, the toy, as a more sophisticated version of a pacifier – a thing that will keep the child busy by him/herself.¹²⁴ Also, by ensuring that a child is engaged in toy play by him/herself, parents create an intimate and therefore, presumably safe space for play. In a way, then, toys in children's cultures can be viewed as luxury items that may also be used as *controlling devices* that limit and guide how toys are used in relation to space and time.

In a family environment adult toy players tend to wish to separate their toys from the toys of their children. The parents' toys are kept away from the nursery in order to avoid confusion about to whom the toys belong. At the 'Testimonials' section of the Piggy Wiggies website¹²⁵ an adult fan expresses her enthusiasm for the toys in the following way: "These little pigs are so darn cute, I didn't want to give them to my kids because I wanted them for me. They're the type of toy where I want to put them on a shelf and look at them instead of letting them get drooled on. I didn't want sticky fingers touching MY little pigs...".

Besides addressing the spatial and mental distance between the sphere of the toy play of adults and children, the example also illustrates the different approach in modality children and adults may have towards toys: As a child yearns for sensory engagement, an adult may also enjoy the toy from a distance. However, as hair play in the context of dolls is quite a common dimension of adult play, sensory engagement cannot be excluded from the multidimensional and multimodal adult toy experience.

So the question of spatiality and toy play in child's play relates to what happens in the nursery and when considering adult play, the level of intimacy that ludic engagement with a toy requires of the playing adult. However, as has been shown in previous chapters, both children and adults may play with a toy either alone or in the company of others. Although children will always seek to have a separate play culture of their own (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 125), this does not mean that their play would not be seen to happen in public environments and to be understood as play, even when engaging with a toy. As my research material shows, adult gatherings that tie in with toy-related activities are somewhat hidden in their nature:

¹²⁴ Toy industry analyst, Chris Byrne, also (rather harshly, but quite appropriately) pointed to this idea of the toy as a pacifier by referring to the plaything as a 'shut up toy' during a conversation we had at the Hong Kong International Toy Fair in January 2013.

¹²⁵ <http://piggywiggies.com/press> accessed March 2012.

All 'bronies' [adult fans of the *My Little Pony* TV series and toys] are not open about their hobby, as they are afraid of the reaction from their environment. According to one bronie interviewed in the article, "a man [in Finland] should sit in the sauna and drink beer. If you are different, you will get beaten." This is one of the reasons why real names are not used, not in the Internet forums, fan meetings or elsewhere. The men know each other best by their pen names (von Herzen, 2012, C1).

In the thinking of Cross (2008, 82), hobbies offer men a chance to share in a boy-man world of escape from the expectations of maturity. But as I have discussed earlier in Chapter 5, the possibility of an infantilized culture should not be the only explanation to why adults enjoy toys and the company of other like-minded people. Instead, we should be asking why adult toy play is such a delicate matter that it needs to be kept out of the public eye and limited to intimate spaces such as garages and club rooms.

In the course of writing this thesis, I have, however, become more assured that some movement is happening from the hidden into the open – from intimate spaces to public (and physical) environments of toy play: Leisurely discussions with toy shop owners and toy store employees in the U.S.A. and England tell tales of customer traffic hours on weekends, during which the toy aficionados, in this case, mainly men, emerge from their garage play spaces to a more public sphere of play. Another example I found in an industry magazine confirms that adult men are intrigued by the possibility of playing with toys inside the toy shop. In a speciality toy store in Hannover, Germany, a "men evening" is hosted twice a week for 30 men at the time. They each pay 30 euros (just under 40 dollars) for the opportunity to have some beer and prezels and the opportunity to play with model trains, radio control vehicles, steam engines, slot racing, or other such items (Dobbie, 2013, 32).¹²⁶

Other stories, on the other hand, have to do with Asian toy players who do not fear carrying their toys around with them to various social events or having their entire toy collection displayed in their working spaces also for others to see and enjoy. This illustrates how cultural attitudes may differ also when considering the 'show and tell' aspect of adult engagement with toys and how this relates to the notion of spatiality.

¹²⁶ According to the industry publication communicating this story, the playing men cannot make toy purchases during these evenings, but in most cases 'many of them return to buy on subsequent days. These "men evenings" are booked six months in advance and the store's owner make more profit in one year of these events than he does in operating the store...' See "Change is in the Air", *Toys & Family Entertainment*, February 2013, 32.

The larger puppets and my hamster puppet I keep in my closet because they are more conspicuous and I think it might be suspicious for friends to see that I keep puppets. Smaller ones can be interpreted as interior decoration. My toys may seem decorative in the bathroom and beside the coffee maker. (TP/le)

In a home environment, displaying and showing one's toys is a different story. At a micro-level, toys claim their space not in the hearts of the players (alone), but in their homes. In the intimacy of the home as the interview quote above shows, adults may keep the toys hidden or purposively on show as conversational pieces. In the case of the former scenario the toy may never come out of its station: "Barkley [stuffed beagle] stays in the suitcase when I'm home... He only comes out for trips".¹²⁷ In the latter, toys are actively displayed.

Many adult toy players use playthings to decorate living spaces. Seen in this way, toys as *conversational pieces* may communicate meanings that we associate with choices in the material dimensions of lifestyle and trends. The aspect of socio-pleasure of products has to do with interaction with others. 'Products that facilitate communication as well as those that serve as conversation pieces contribute to socio pleasure' (Battarbee, 2004, 38–39). The toy as a displayed item in the home represents communication that occurs between the toy and the player, and on the other hand the toy and the player and a possible 'audience' of other (potential) players.

The spatial position of a toy may be different when considered from the perspective of a 'toying artist'. Many of the artists interviewed for this study had toys both in their studios and in their homes. As in many other cases, these adult toy players allow some of the toys to be played with by (their own) children, although some special toys are kept away from the hands of children.

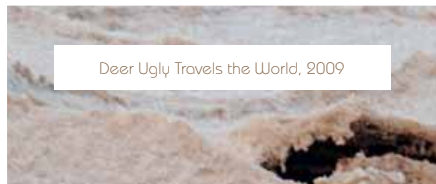
[The toys] are at my studio and not very systematically there. But at home I have some that my children are allowed to play with. Still there are some that I have been holding on to that I don't let them break, but there are not that many. But they can be in a glass cabinet. (TA/ele)

¹²⁷ See "Third of adults still take teddy bear to bed" (2010) *The Telegraph*, 16 August, 2010.

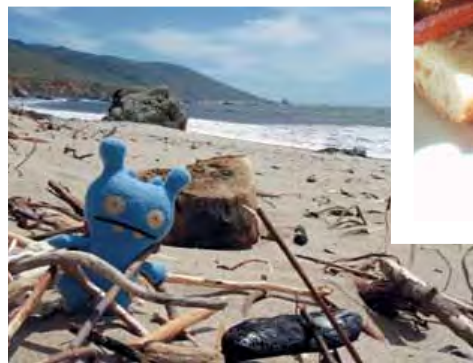


Toy collection of artists Katja Tukiainen and Matti Hagelberg. Photographed by Katja Tukiainen.

The toy as an inspirational object displayed by artists and as a creatively and productively displayed artefact by 'everyday players' will be discussed further in Chapter 10 in association with adult toy player profiles. I will now move on to consider the toy as a physical object that is not always kept in one place such as a cabinet or another place in a home or a studio. My objective is to demonstrate how toys in today's world are more and more artefacts that need to be considered as mobile entities, and thus things that do not stay in their place in the point of sales or the home, but go where their players do, or in some extreme cases even to places where the player him/herself does not.



Deer Ugly Travels the World, 2009





Ciao, 2012



Barbapapa character toy left in a surfer lodge yard in Peniche, Portugal, 2011.

Toy mobility

I have a lot of fun with the doll, because it is small and you can put it in a lot of places. (TP/le)

The toy closet has its place in many players' homes, but the discussion of toys and spatiality needs to be taken further by addressing the topic of the *mobile toy*. Considering toys as artefacts, there are many sorts of movement in relation to the physical object: Mobility in toys may either be addressed by pointing out toys that move by themselves – the category of automata, or by considering toys as artefacts that are made mobile by the players in one way or another.

Conceptually, toys as a category may move from their place of origins, a sub culture to the mainstream as we have seen in the case of the designer toy. Mechanically, toys as playthings that move by themselves have always intrigued inventors.

Moving toys developed in the 1800s side-by-side with advances in clockwork construction and the technology of metal plate punching. Lots of cheap mechanical toys were manufactured in Europe in the late 19th century, representing various aspects of life such as professions, the circus, animals, music and transport. The earliest manufacturers were French and German. (Of Toys and Men, exhibition press materials).

As this thesis concentrates on toys that are animated by the players and not by built-in mechanics, so-called 'automata', we will move next to toy mobility in the context of non-mechanical toys; dolls, action figures and soft toys. Physically, as shown, the child as a player does not always keep his/her toys in the nursery, instead, favourite toys travel with their player as mascots and talismans, as friends and trustees. Similar play patterns can be detected in my research material concerning adults.

Mobility in terms of toy play behaviour relates to affordances of toys. For example, toy company Kenner made their Star Wars figures pocket-sized, so they could be carried around and played with wherever the player might want to (Geraghty, 1996, 213). Since the beginnings of these massively popular action figures, many toys are designed with mobility in mind. In other words, the player should be able to take the toys with him/her and thus to expand the play environment beyond the living space. Unt claims that 'any environment can be a play environment, regardless of its original function and aim' (2012, 148). Therefore, a toy can be played with anywhere, as long as its physical being affords carrying around. A study conducted in Britain in 2010 revealed that 25% of the men who answered the survey said that they take their teddybear away with them on business trips, because it reminds them of home.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ See "Third of adults 'still take teddy bear to bed" (2010) *The Telegraph*, 16 August, 2010). It is interesting to note here that the toy in this case becomes an artefact that may not only function as a time-machine that catapults the adult back to childhood, but also as a vehicle that momentarily allows the experience of domesticity (and comfort) to occur when the owner of the toy is traveling.



'White magic': Watchover Voodoo Doll, from the author's own toy collection, hung in the car 'for protection' 2011.

But a toy character may suggest itself to be brought along, outside of ordinary environments. In fact, a toy may, according to its back story, 'get bored' unless it is taken out on adventures:

Playful Pig. Tickle, tickle, giggle, giggle. Playful Pig prefers to squirm and squiggle. Take it on a trip to explore. You Playful Pig won't get bored (Bubele's Patch Buddies sales brochure, 2012).

Back stories written either by the designer (or the marketing department) of a toy company may encourage the player to take the toy out. An example retrieved from the Piggy Wiggies website demonstrates: "One look...one squeeze...is all you need to fall in love with Piggy Wiggies. Whether you want to cuddle up to them, put them in your handbag or take them to school or work...In fact, anywhere you go...they really are the perfect little friend!!!"

Another example comes from a family of soft toy characters called Zombie Zoo. The sales brochure characterizes 'Boo' as someone who explores his environment: "Boo is the natural-born leader and is a curious explorer who often leads the others on excursions in hopes to find what lies beyond the zoo. The other zombies turn to him for advice and council" (Zombie Zoo Press Kit, 2012).

The traveling toy

Puppy [soft toy] has been camping, on a cruise... She [the owner of the toy] has never lost the stuffed animal when travelling but said to do so would be "disastrous" (Mayerowitz, 2010).

'Space is also an element that can be actively played with. Space can be compared to a plaything, a toy' (Unt, 2012, 145). When a toy is involved, as we have seen, any physical space may become a playground. When brought along while traveling, an adult may engage playfully with the toy character even outside the 'everyday' environment. The quote above illustrates that toys are frequently traveling with their owners, although there is always the risk of misplacing the toy.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ According to the survey conducted by Travelodge in Britain and Spain, a large number of 'the bear-toting travelers are men'. The hotel had during 12 months 'reunited more than 75 000 bears with their owners'. See Mayerowitz, Scott (2010) "Bedtime story: 4-in-1 Grown Men Travel with a Stuffed Animal", *abc News* August 24, 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/grown-men-travel-stuffed-animals-teddy-bears-dogs/story?id=11463664#UH-U92_Kdi0.



Guatemalan Worry Doll (for travel worries), from the author's own collection, purchased in Santa Fé, New Mexico, 2012.

One of the most recent and perhaps extravagant activities that occur in relation with adults and toys has to do with toys as travel companions and further, the toy travel agencies that have emerged as serious businesses during the past years.

The predecessor for the traveling toy is the traveling gnome. Garden gnomes are taken "back to nature". *The Garden Gnome Liberation Front* rose to fame in France in year 1997. "The traveling gnome prank is the practice of returning garden gnome "to the wild". It involves stealing a gnome, taking it on a trip, and photographing it at famous landmarks, with the photos being returned to the owner".¹³⁰

The gnome is more a decorative item than a toy, but it has clearly offered inspiration to the companies that advertise taking a toy on a tour and photographing it in various locations.

The idea of the toy which wanders in natural environments seems to have experienced a boost from the film directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet – *Amélie* (2001). This film depicts a garden gnome that is kidnapped from its original site and taken to popular sights around the world and then photographed in front of them.

The connection with the inspiration this film offers to toy fans becomes evident from looking at a recent phenomenon: On the Internet, one may find several travel agencies that are specialize in toy travel: These agencies provide players with services through which a toy may be sent on a trip and photographed at popular tourist sights with photographs sent to them as keepsakes. Two examples follow and as the latter shows, the activity is inspired by the film *Amélie*.

Barcelona Toy Travel is the first and also a unique travel agency for cuddly toys and teddy bears in Spain. We offer your cuddly toy several-day sightseeing and adventure tour in Barcelona, one of the most engaging and breathtaking cities in the world (See <http://www.barcelonatoytravel.com/>).

¹³⁰ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Travelling_Gnome.

Inspired by the 2001 film *Amélie*, a new travel agency in the Czech Republic called Toy Traveling is offering a unique luxury vacation not for you, but for your toys. You send them your favorite stuffed animal and they'll take it on an escorted luxury trip all around Prague, taking photographs of it at sights like Prague Castle and the Charles Bridge. And if you'd like your fuzzy friend to really have a great time you can even pay extra for a massage, which includes incense and candles, or the 'dearest package' that comes with a cushion and duvet to make the journey home especially comfortable on his padded little behind (See <http://www.luxist.com/2010/02/26/toy-travel-agency-will-take-your-teddy-bear-on-a-luxury-vacation/>).



Leaving Circus for Holiday, 2010

It is not only companies selling these activities, as described above. 'Everyday players' are apparently functioning as 'toy travel' agencies too. An example of traveling toys is the one of 'Hans the Backpacker'¹³¹, a toy persona who is sent on adventures by his German owner. Hans is sent to volunteers around the world in exchange for toy photographs taken at local sights, that are sent to a blog (Virtanen 2012, 61).

Although I recognize this behaviour as play, the question is whether it is becoming a serious form thereof, as illustrated by Susanna Mattheiszen, a blog writer and toy

¹³¹ See <http://hans-the-backpacker.blogspot.com/>.

enthusiast who in a magazine interview admits to ‘taking play too seriously’, as in the case when she hosted the stay of two Playmobil characters Hans and Paul coming from Germany to Finland (Virtanen 2012, 61).

The traveling toy comes to have other meanings in the realm of contemporary mass-produced toys. A Guatemalan Worrydoll purchased in Santa Fé, New Mexico, 2012, is especially targeted to players with ‘travel worries’. The ‘traveling toy’ however, refers to a toy that is made mobile by toy tourism. This is where the line between the toy and a mascot blurs. It is also possible to see the toy as a talisman; a protective artefact that functions as a guardian for its player. From the concept of toy tourism I will, in the last passage of the chapter, go on to discuss two more dimensions of toys and spatiality, namely the one of ‘play space’ and secondly, the ‘digital dolldoms’.

Play space

Research on play and anthropological studies in particular are interested in the relations between reality and fantasy and the relations between qualities and meanings given to playthings (Lönnqvist, 1991, 20–21, orig. Buytendijk, 1973). To play fully and well, says Henricks, one must accept a framework of understandings about the play sphere (2006, 129). In my understanding, the sphere of play can also be seen as what I call here a ‘play space’.

Play does not require physical action, reminds Unt (2012, 182). Therefore, one might add, play does not require movement from one physical space to another. Imaginative thinking builds up a magic circle of play (as in the thinking of Huizinga) where the only thing ruining this imagined construct is a situation of social play where the players are unable to agree on how the play will go and flow. The notion of play space refers to this sphere of play that is made up by the physical players, and in the context of this thesis toys, but is manifested as imagined scenarios and situations as developed by the players in mutual agreement. The topic of space in reference to toy play comes thus to mean not only transitions between physical spaces, but also a movement between real and imagined environments. In fact, a play space may mean an ‘entire fictional construct that exists parallel to reality and can be partially embodied in real space’. On a metaphorical level, ‘potentially, play is always dynamic and in movement’ (Unt, 2012, 118, 145).

Play is a type of mediator when moving from the world of work to the world of play and again back to reality (Karkama, 1981, 19). Play activities inhabit both space and times

set apart from ordinary affairs (Henricks, 2006, 66). For the adult, ‘reality’ may mean everyday tasks or work. Toy play allows a break in these activities, as an excerpt from one of my interviews shows:

For me toys allow me to take a break from very cognitive activities. (TP/le)

The toy connects tightly with the concept of leisure time, as Kline writes: ‘The child with toys is a symbol of the pleasures of consumerism, of the new objects primarily designed for leisure and fantasy’ (Kline, 1993, 59). But Auerbach sees it from a more positive angle, saying: ‘Playtime is one area that provides the most fun, relaxation, entertainment –and educational socialization – for everyone’ (Auerbach, 2004, 13). So not only can playing with toys be observed through the lens of physical space, but also a sphere inside which the ludic engagement touches upon the subject of time. And maybe more accurately, time spent away from consciously cognitive activities – in fantasies and ‘play-dreaming.’

Cross-cultural studies show that both in subsistence and industrial societies, girls seem to have less free time to play than boys (Smith, 2010, 95). Whereas free time for play is controlled and regulated for many kindergarten children, adults often have more freedom to choose whether or not to use time on playing. Kalliala claims that there simply is not enough time for the construction of gratifying long-term play in Finnish kindergartens, where time is mostly dedicated to ‘aimless wandering’. In an ideal situation, children should not be stopped too often to disengage from play. One way of interpreting these thoughts is to think of time given to play as valuable in itself. As one collector put it, ‘when money is not an issue, the question becomes “How do you want to spend your time?”’ (Hickey, 1997, 94).

Leisure, then, can be seen as an extraordinary meeting place for the real and the unreal, and it is also, as seen by Blackshaw ‘what is not perhaps exactly the same thing – and extraordinary meeting place of the serious and superficial, and this is what captures its fundamental ambivalence’ (Blackshaw, 2010, 31). In sum, leisure plays a fundamental part in experiencing the play space; it affords the player to lose oneself in the flow. In the flow of play one may lose track of time, but interaction with toys can also transport us back in time, as will be discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 8). Before concluding the chapter at hand, however, I would like to touch upon the subject of an additional dimension of toys and space in the name of social media.

Digital 'dolldoms'

As we already saw in Chapter 6, the different cultural realms make it possible to examine adult toy play more thoroughly. As proposed, I have made it clear that adult toy play is manifested in culture not only in the realms of different academic, professional and commercial interest, but on both the levels of the corporeal and the virtual. In other words, social media has to be included on the list of contemporary playgrounds. It becomes therefore relevant to also see this culture as a space for play.

The digital dimension also forms a new and interesting 'playground' for toy players. Digital environments such as social media services and platforms (Flickr, YouTube etc.) offer the players a suitable place to display their play practices. Traditional, three-dimensional and tactile dolls, action figures and soft toys include an element not yet present in the digital play spaces: They function as *tangible* portals to the magic circle of play as presented by Johan Huizinga (1938). In the age of the Internet, this circle seems to extend itself from the material into the digital.

Kaarina Nikunen notes that a fan may express her fandom towards a wide international audience, to establish relationships with other fans but at the same time keep herself inside the private sphere next to the home computer. The significance of online fan communities is particularly in the fact that they represent publicity created by the fans themselves (2008, 185, 187). One additional note therefore, in the discussion of toys and space, refers to how in the age of the Internet, toy players may interact with each other through digital media although the starting point for the connection is a material 'medium' – the toy. At the same time, by engaging in play on the playgrounds of digital media, the toy player often communicates from the intimacy of the home environment towards a possible global public environment.¹³²

To conclude, it is justifiable to point out that toys as other objects of fandom, do bring people together despite physical, spatial limitations. Toys as a communicative medium in themselves, afford communication not between the toy and the player, but as seen, between the toy and groups of like-minded players and that this communication now takes place in both physical and digital spaces. What this means for toy design, is what Volonté points out: 'Designers are faced with the task of making the object useful as an instrument of social communication. Designing makes the world better because it equips

¹³² Social media offers toy fans the possibility to explore the often rich storytelling behind contemporary toys. Says Michael Shore, Mattel's vice-president of global consumer insights: "Fans can create and design their own characters, story settings, and story extensions and proudly share them with other Monster High fans". See Sullivan, Christine (2013) "Competition heats up in the doll category", *Toys & Family Entertainment*, February 2013, 40–43.

people with new tools to communicate with others in a world where communication has become the individual's main source of identity, satisfaction and self-realization' (Volonté, 2010, 120). Apparently, this applies to contemporary toys as well.



Screen shot from my own Flickr pages, an example of a site for a 'Digital Dolldom', 2010.



Fashion Doll, 2009



Nostalgia, 2011

Chapter 8: Toys and time

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.
- Plato (427–347 B.C.E.)

A teddy bear filled with sawdust, didn't last time. It had a turquoise vest (ATD/akk).

The question of time in reference to toy culture is a complex one. The questions of toys and their time-related dimension refer to the many levels in the relations between the adult and the toy. First, toys can be seen as time machines, time capsules and transformative objects in relation to how we view and experience time.

When discussing toys and time, one may refer to the manifold dimensions of experiencing time in terms of the plaything or the playing activity. Topics of discussion may then relate to when and how we pass time with the toy, what is the toy's ability to last in time and furthermore, how a toy affords itself as a material container for memories. Thus, the toy, as understood in contemporary cultures, is an artefact that conceptually affords examination on many levels and on a temporal axis between nostalgia and now. We may ask how a toy manages to awaken nostalgia for things as they were. On the other hand, and perhaps more interestingly seen from the design perspective, we might ask how to design sustainability in a toy so that it will have as long a lifecycle as possible.

In this chapter, I will bring up the topic of adults, toys and endurance – the question of whether or not toys as playful artefacts used by adults, have an automatic 'glow' that enables them to maintain their importance and status in time. Moreover, I will elaborate on the longevity of toys through the concept of lifecycles. The presumption is that the relations that adults have to toys differ somewhat from the ones of children, as in today's world, new toys are constantly marketed to children and perhaps, they have a pressure to acquire them because of their peer groups.¹³³ Adults do not necessarily experience this pressure with the probable exception of hard core fans and collectors, but are free to choose what kind of toys they acquire and when they buy them.

When discussing toys and time it is impossible not to give a voice to toy stories that refer to old toys. It is important, however, to keep in mind that 'old' can mean many things. For many of us it communicates either a historical toy or the kind of toy we had as

¹³³This is also known as 'pester power' (Lee, 2001, 75) or 'the nag factor' in industry terms.

children. As not all people want to preserve their toys (or the toys of their own children, for that matter) they either end up in the trash bin – or enter the market again. If they have that certain glow about them, evidently, new players will find these toys, most often at flea markets. Hence, the toy will endure. Sustainable toys afford longer life-cycles and the sustainability may come to mean other things besides material sturdiness. Therefore, I will employ the concept of the retro toy and come full circle to where I started the chapter, to the notion of the time machine.

Lastly, I will attempt to make a conclusive summary relating to the topic as discussed in the previous chapter, namely the one of space. For in the last passage of this chapter, I will elaborate on time dedicated to first leisure and second, ‘serious play’ which also is manifested as a dimension of contemporary adult toy play. But let us begin by exploring how toys can be seen as artefacts that arouse both a feeling of longing, and on the other hand, the quality of longevity.

Time machines and transitional objects

But when a modern poet says that everyone has a picture for which he would be willing to give the whole world, how many people would not look for it in an old box of toys? (Benjamin, 2005b, 120).

As we have seen in the previous chapters, toy play may manifest itself in several locations both on physical and digital playgrounds. It is also possible to consider the activity as a reflective process where interaction with the plaything occurs within the ‘space of the mind’. From spatial considerations on toy play, it is time to turn to the questions concerning the dimension of time – since there are many.

Finnish novelist Hannu-Pekka Björkman writes of the meanings our childhood landscapes come to convey later in life: Because they tell about who we are and because when being close to them, we became and become ourselves. They carry with them a memory of innocence that reaches beyond time (Björkman, 2011, 116). In a similar manner, the landscapes of our material reality including toy collections of childhood, may turn into mental images that transport us back in time easily.

As we have seen, a toy may be a child’s first possession. What makes toys particularly valuable artefacts for the child is the reason that they may become transitional objects in the child’s relationship with his/her mother, relationships with the world of things and other people, notes Sutton-Smith (1986, 44). The notion of the transitional object was first coined by English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896–1971), one of the most influential theorists on object play.

In his work *Play and Reality* (1971), the author tries to theorize the reasons to why the human being becomes attached to objects in the first place.

Winnicott was the first to investigate the psychological significance of young children’s early ‘not-me’ objects; for example the attachment the child forms to a soft toy (Crozier, 1994, 90). According to his theory, the transitional space between mother and child both connects and separates them. It is the ‘either-or’ or the ‘neither-nor’. Soft toys, for example are ‘objects that help the child move away from the Mother by operating as substitutes for the maternal presence. They are loved fiercely, and, in the strongest instances, they never leave the child’ (Ivy, 2010, 19). What Winnicott notes about this relation between the human self and the material object is that it ‘establishes here an underdetermined space, a blur between fantasy and reality’ (Marks-Tarlow, 2010, 43). Furthermore, as a transitional object the toy bridges the gap between time spent with the Mother and the time the child spends alone with the toy.

In my suggestion, similarly, we can look at the relationship between an adult and the toy. The plaything, as the transitional object of childhood and a possible time machine in adulthood, allows the player to connect mentally with both her ‘here and now’ persona and also with the one in childhood and thus gives a play value that relates to time and space not unlike Winnicott’s ideas about the transitional space. Let us take an example from my research materials illustrating the possibility of seeing the toy as an object that bridges the adult self to his/her childhood:

M occupies herself with her miniature world only when the mood is on. – In this way one may realize the longing for a good childhood. The doll house hobby has a calming and therapeutical effect (Wolamies, 2011, 36).

In our ever-expanding material world one comes to wonder to what extent people are willing to become attached and to form sustainable relationships to artefacts. Nachmanovitz brings up the question of peoples ‘nonrelation’ with things (1990, 150). This means that products are to be considered bad in the sense that they do not encourage their owners to form long-terms relation to the product. How to strengthen the sustainability i.e. through the play value in a toy, and in that way prolong play, ‘toys should provide children with some immediate success. At the same time they should allow the player to longer term engagement ‘(perhaps weeks or months) to explore and understand the full complexity of the toy’ (Sutton-Smith, *The Psychology of Toys and Play*, 3). In other words, the toy should afford a long-term possibility of exploration and in that way to cater for (continuous) curiosity.

Moreover, Auerbach adds, the toy's appeal should make it a long-term investment for the one buying the product so that the player will want to return to use it frequently (Auerbach, 2009, 15). There is, of course, another agenda embedded here: We have learned that most toys for children are acquired so that the child would entertain him/herself (Keskinen, 2006) as in the case of the pacifier, or 'shut up toy'. One dimension of play value regarding the relation between children and the adult, concerns the possibility for the adult to go away and to leave the child with the toy: to spend time elsewhere. According to a study conducted by the Finnish Consumer Bureau, 'good children's articles keep the child occupied during the time the adult takes care of household tasks' (ibid.). To think of toys in this way underlines what Mouritsen already wrote in the final years of the 20th century: 'toys...are an adult project and satisfy an adult need' (Mouritsen, 1999, 65). When considering the toy playing adult again, it is clear that an adult is free to occupy her/himself with the toy voluntarily. Very often, the time that adults spend with toys takes place during leisure time. This may be one reason for why the toy playing adult often refers to the activity of play as a hobby.

Whereas a child's time occupied in the company of toys may be an unintentional activity, the adult will consciously choose to dedicate time and intention to toy play. Activities taken during leisure time, again, most often aim at positive experiences. It has been said that good experiences are those which leave a memory trace in our mind. So too, may personal possessions attach special meanings to oneself (Norman, 2004, 50). The value of the past is inarguable, when considering toys as *containers for memories*. Belk (1988) and Koskijoki (1997) describe possessions as containers in which people are able to store their memories. A memory can be understood as a past experience; the object is a strong reminder of this experience (Koskijoki 1997, 276). According to Kwant (1999, 2, 6 cited in Luutonen, 2007, 42) artefacts preserve memories in three main ways. First, they give the memory a concrete image. Second, they provide stimuli to the memory. And third, they store information about an experience.

I think toys can also link adults to memories of childhood. Holding on to a part of childhood. (TP/le)

Koji Harmon (writes, photographer, painter of toys): My favorite line is Takara Microman. I had these growing up, so they always bring back a lot of memories. Like time machines, they take me back to my childhood.' (*Super 7 The Book*, 2005, 163).

A toy is a memory place (Phoenix, 2006, 7) not unlike childhood books which are appreciated for their nostalgic value and the innocence they convey in their way of mediating world views (Wessman, 2012, 12–13). 'One just can't let go of the cute teddy bears of childhood' says a feature in a Finnish monthly lifestyle magazine, to which adults have posted photographs of their teddy bears, both originating from their childhood or recent acquisitions that decorate living spaces (*Kodin Kuvalehti* 2/2012, 3). One either holds tightly on to the actual toy he or she had as a child, or alternatively on to the memory in the case that the toy is gone. Often, the memory of a toy connects to people, places and situations in which the toy was received (often as a gift) or played with.

You go back to a certain time frame, growing up, people have a really good memory of a toy that they got what was either Christmas or birthday or something... (TD/bb)

[An interesting toy object] It can mean the most powerful moment that you can remember of being with family and friends. (TD/dk)

Sometimes, even looking at old toys or looking at photographs of old toys will take one back to childhood and at the same time, a state of flow takes over the mind of the player: "[With toys]... you forget about the whole world for a while and hours go by so that you don't even notice" (AS. in Niinikoski 2011).

When people interested in dolls gather in the craft [toy museum], there is laughter and some tears too. So strongly do the dolls awaken memories and bring up emotions. A connection to childhood and the world of play is opened (Salakari, 2012, 72).

Memories of those who lived their childhood or youth in Finland in the 1970s are shared in a Facebook group dedicated to this time. Photographs and videos from the 70s are circulated and discussed, and they act as mediators of memories related to for example artefacts such as toys. One commentator experienced an emotional outburst when seeing a photograph of a green tin plate toy. She says: "The feeling of that I had such [a toy] was like, I had that, it CAN'T be true, where is it! It was so concrete, but forgotten and the photograph gave so many memories back to me" (Vuorela, 2010).

A few collectors had offered huge amounts for the train set, but Visa had stand firm. "The most beautiful childhood memory is not for sale", he had chuckled somewhat pathetically (Pakkanen, 2011, 47, English trans. by the author).

Adults who still have their toys from childhood are usually reluctant to let others play with their toy, let alone sell the toy like in the case of the fictional character of the quote above.¹³⁴ In many of the interviews gathered during the 'Adult Toy Day' I organized in 2009, the toy owners had specific ideas about to whom the toy would be handed on later.

...the seal toy could be bequeathed to one's own children or then to the home of one's parents. (TP/ps)

The wooden horse will be inherited by someone in the fourth generation of players. (ATD/tm)

However, in many cases, the interviews on Adult Toy Day showed, that there was no toy preserved, only nostalgia towards toy play that happened in one's childhood. In these toy stories, the memory of a toy was manifested as a concrete image in the mind of the adult. What nostalgia is according to anthropologist Susan Stewart's view (1993), is sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that is unauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Nostalgia is the 'desire for desire'.

Over along period she collected two of each [McDonald's Happy Meal] toy and store every second one in a cupboard, which now contains a large and systematic set of the toys: she hopes that one day they will be valuable as 'collector's items'. She keeps them in the original packets: 'they will be their inheritance'. [...] Watching them play with these toys has remained one of her greatest delights. She also sees this ritual play as the form by which her children developed and stored their own memories of childhood. She says: 'If you have objects it triggers so much more, it triggers the moment that you bought the object... and it triggers the visual... and I think a lot of children

¹³⁴ The movie "TED" presents a situation, where the teddybear character owned by the main character refuses to let go of its owner. The tension is resolved in the end of the film when the 35-year-old John with his girlfriend, rescues Ted the teddybear from oblivion by wishing it to stay in the lives of the human couple. Ted again has grown with its owner into an adult bear with (questionable) adult manners of swearing, drinking and smoking pot.

do remember things visually. And so when you ask me what was the toy when that fight happened at McDonald's, I would have to get them to tell me' (Miller, 2008, 129–130).

Nostalgia is a topic often brought up in people's relationships to toys, as seen in the passage above. Stewart goes on to argue that a childhood souvenir is used most often to evoke a voluntary memory of childhood. However, she points out that this childhood is not a childhood as lived; it is a childhood voluntarily remembered. The narrative is crucial to the souvenir (1993, 145, 150). Daniel Miller agrees when he notes that 'When we talk of reflection on things, we tend to think, first, in terms of the medium of language and thought' (2008, 87).¹³⁵

Mono no aware, writes Salmela (2010), is a Japanese term for fleeting aesthetic. What it means is essentially a bittersweet recognition of the fact that the most adorable (kawaii) moment is about to end soon, and will never be the same again. Maybe for this, the memories of childhood toys and toy experiences can never be grasped fully by a researcher. Yet, what is perhaps more tangible, is what toy designer can capture by analyzing the nostalgic narratives. As Brian Flynn illustrates, it may even be used in the development of new toy ideas:

Brian Flynn, toy designer at Super 7: Nostalgia is a powerful factor; it is what got me started collecting toys in the first place. I think all of us collect with a heavy sense of nostalgia. What is interesting to me is to take that nostalgia, and twist it into something new (Vartanian, 2006, 35).

Nostalgia – even though it does not translate to an actual tool to be used in toy design – is undoubtedly a highly marketable notion, when considering the allure of the 'retro' toy. This notion will be explored further in the subchapter below. What needs to be examined closer before considering longevity, are the lifecycles of toys as products on a more general level.

¹³⁵ One needs to remember, that different cultures attach different meanings to toys even as artefacts that are passed on from generation to generation. In different cultures toys are valued and pertained in different ways. For example in India a set of toys is given to the bride to retain her childhood and to pass the toy play over to the next generation. Associated with magical powers, dolls have held an important role in ancient religions, and today still maintain a central role in practices within religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shinto (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, xiii).

Lifecycles

Margolin explains the concept of the *product cycle* as follows: ‘Every product goes through a process of development and use that begins with its conception, planning, and manufacturing, moves to its acquisition and use, and ends with its disassembly or disposal’ (Margolin, 2002, 46). Relevant questions when studying objects, in Appadurai’s thinking, are where it comes from, who has made it and what kind of “career” the object has had so far. What is also important is to consider how the thing’s use changes with its age and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness (Appadurai, 1986, 66). We have previously discovered that mass-produced toys in terms of design come, in most cases from the U.S.A., Europe and Japan. In terms of production, the majority today comes from Asia; China and India. The largest volume comes from global giants such as Hasbro and Mattel. In reference to time, mass-produced toys are either bought as pristine, new products in hypermarkets or small-scale points of purchase, or as second-hand in flea markets, garage sales, toy conventions and online shops such as eBay. What is more interesting in the context of this chapter is how toys ‘mature’ and what happens when they have come to the end of their life-cycle.

All products have a limited lifetime, toys more than most. Kids lose interest in particular toys and quickly move into new ones (Kline, 1993, 224).

As Margolin notes, contemporary design work regards longevity as a desired value in products (2002, 49). The life-cycles of toys have to do with both in their material and conceptual durability. The first dimension is easy to understand, but what do I mean with conceptual endurance? Toys should not be grown out of in a fast pace, as Sutton-Smith points out. ‘Instead, toys must grip the imagination and the imagination must outgrow them’ (*The Paradoxes of Toys*). I would like to stress that this applies to toys for players of all ages. Elkind claims that if children have too many toys and have them all the time, they find it difficult to become attached to the toys and select the ones that stimulate the fantasy and imagination (2007, 18). Adult toy players seem to have less toys than many children do, unless they are ‘hard-core’ collectors. In my thinking, adults are more economical when choosing toys for themselves. At the same time, they seem to be more ecological, as their relationships with toys are more long-term.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ According to an article published in *The Telegraph*, more than half of Britons still have a teddy bear from childhood and the average teddy bear is 27 years old. See “Third of adults ‘still take teddy bear to bed’” (2010) *The Telegraph*, 16 August, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/7947502/Third-of-adults-still-take-teddy-bear-to-bed.html#>.

del Vecchio’s thinking supports my argument. He writes that ‘adults often find comfort in the same old thing, and it takes effort to get them to try something new, kids are just the opposite; they embrace newness and shy away from the same old thing.’¹³⁷ ‘Children want this year’s toys and this year’s innovations, for those are the items that are talked about’ (del Vecchio, 2003, 132). In his analysis of adult toy consumers, Rinker sees ‘Trenders’ as the individuals who own the “hottest” toys. He elaborates:

They value toys not for their “playability,” but for the prestige of ownership. The minute the craze is over, they are into something else. If you are a collector, this is a personality worth identifying. Since a trender’s attention span is short, his toys usually don’t show heavy use; because he has little attachment to them, he abandons them when leaving home. Eventually, parents simply want to get rid of them. Toys coming from this source are usually purchased cheaply and in great shape (Rinker, 1991, 6).

According to previous research in the field of toys, most toy ranges now have a two to three-year lifespan (Fleming, 1996, 116). Many adults, however, seem to value a toy with a longer lifecycle. Sustainability is a concept of importance for toy designers as well, as one of my interviewees suggests:

KH: If we consider the toy as a material artefact – what do you emphasise especially, when thinking about [the work of] toy designers?

Interviewee: Sustainable development. (TR/rk)

Reyne Rice, a toy industry trend analyst sees eco-friendly toys as a ‘sustainable topic’ in 2013, and believes consumers to carve out budgets for products that promote eco-consciousness and concern for our natural resources.¹³⁸ The idea of sustainability, is not automatically embraced by all companies, as the following excerpt from my interviews illustrates:

A mistrust, or attitude against sustainability in toys as guided by the industry... the main thing is about value for money. Play for 2 years maximum. Rarely the

¹³⁷ Here, I would like to refer to Nick Lee, however, who reminds us that for adults and children, time can have many speeds (Lee, 2001, 142).

¹³⁸ See “A feel for trends” in *Play it! Daily News by Das Spielzeug*, Spielwarenmesse International Toy Fair Nürnberg publication, 30.01.–04.02.2013, 2nd of February 2013.

toys get passed down to next generations. when a child gets the toy on Christmas and plays with it even after 6 months, this defines a good toy. (TD/sp)

On the other hand, the reason why some toys endure on the market and become ‘collectibles’ as described by del Vecchio, is that they reinvent themselves in unique ways every year (del Vecchio, 2003, 132). If reinventing the toy is one of the key factors in sustaining it on the market and makes it durable from a conceptual viewpoint, how could the material qualities of toys be sustained? What affects the longevity of a toy’s life-cycle? On an operational level, the toy should be manufactured with durable materials, even so that it affords washing.

Deaddy bears are made of high quality fabrics. All materials are hypoallergenic, resistant and fully washable. Hence they guarantee a long life to Deaddy Bears and many years of happiness to their adoptive parents (Deaddy Bears sales brochure, 2010).

Ecological viewpoints have been widely under debate in the toy industry, especially during the years of the first decade of the new millennium. What eco-friendliness may mean in toys from the industry viewpoint are the following: operational safety standards, eco-friendly practices, innovative green products, new green principles, reducing the carbon footprint, products safer and less toxic, tracking materials used in their products reducing waste and energy used (Auerbach, 2010). On a conceptual level, eco-friendliness has been addressed as a goal of a toy company at least in the way that it acknowledges and promotes long-term play, as illustrated in the marketing text borrowed from the Deaddy Bears sales brochure. From a practical perspective, ecology in toy production may, for example, mean utilizing excess or renewable natural material.

Forgive us for bragging, but not only are we smartly designed but we’re made of a renewable resource - sustainably harvested hardwood. (Cubebot toys designed by David Weeks studio in the Areaware brochure, 2013)

Furthermore, timeless design is seen to support environmental education and recycling [in toy companies] (Rassi, 2012). For some toy-types, eco-friendliness might challenge the category as a whole, since alternative raw materials might be hard to find:

Vinyl toys are not eco-friendly, but you have to be thinking about the aesthetic. In my other work liability, performance, longevity are important, but in vinyl toys it’s

just that it looks hot. [For] designer toys, a more green material should be found out, vinyl is not the best material. (TD/ls)

What seems like a logical starting point is to produce such toys that would last time. Because if broken, they could be mended. As Rees points out, unlike craft objects it is virtually impossible to mend the majority of manufactured goods. Component parts are often unavailable. When they are available, ‘even the smallest modification to a product is enough to ensure that a customer is forced to buy a full replacement, even if just a part of one component has broken’ (Rees, 1997, 127).

In Finland, there are some independent professionals (i.e. ‘doll doctors’) who know how to repair dolls and soft toys.¹³⁹ What remains unknown is how the major toy companies take a stand to offering help in repairing ‘matured’ mass-produced toys. Toy players themselves, as well as researchers, tend to think positive about the possibility to mend broken toys, and in this way, to extend their lifecycles.

The doll, now 55 years old, has been repaired many times by a ‘doll doctor’ and will be inherited by her daughter at some point. (ATD/us)

...appealing toys are those which can be modified and that may be repaired if broken. (TR/rk)

Play scholar Smith agrees on that some toys are valuable because of their ability to stimulate play. But he takes a negative stance to the overconsumption of toys in western society (Smith, 2010, 215). How designers should then take into consideration the time-related durability of toys, would be to consider how the toy can evolve and grow with the child and be played with by children from multiple age groups (Wachtel, 2012).

I would say my personal principle is to design a toy that will last for a long time and give out a lot of fun, every cent of cost in manufacturing is not wasted, it has every reason to be there and therefore the money spent gives the best value. (TD/sp)

The temporal endurance of the toy (questions regarding durability) is also a question of a toy’s affordance of repetitiveness, its ability to allow the player to manipulate it again, without feelings of boredom. The ideal [toy experience] is something which the child does not become bored with. (TD/sp)

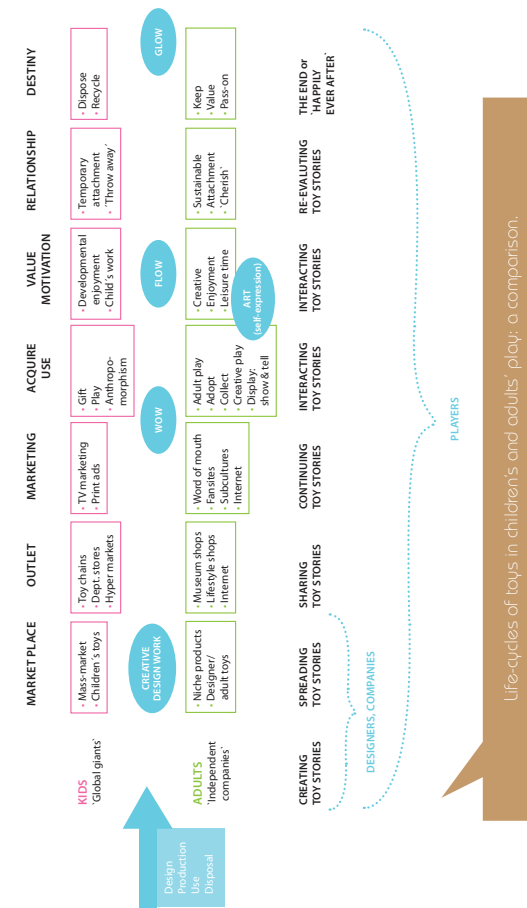
¹³⁹ See e.g. <http://www.nukketohtori.com/www/>.

...the reason we play is because we enjoy it and we want to do it again. (TD/bb)

The more known an object is, the more likely it is that it will lose its play value, claims Rasmussen (1999, 51). Therefore, toy designers should make the toy as versatile as possible. Ingredients for a growing toy, suggests Wachtel, consist of the following: Fun to use, Interesting for the child, Safe and durable, Stimulates creativity and imagination, Encourage inquisitiveness and resourcefulness, A tool for learning, Challenging, yet not frustrating, Invites repeated use and longevity, Involves child interaction, Addresses developing needs as well as nostalgia – that “Magic ingredient”, Cost-effective (Wachtel, 2012). The magic ingredient that Wachtel refers to could almost be described as the holy grail of the toy industry. In other words, it is quite a challenge to invent this. Some products have managed to maintain their versatility and the ‘do-it-again’ dimension through the years. One example outside of the category of traditional dolls and soft toys is the company and the toy known by us all – Lego, which may be seen to have included ‘action figures’ in its line earlier than the company joined forces with the licensing industry. Fortune magazine recognized this success in 2000, when it named Lego the “Toy of the Century”. The popularity of Lego bricks, according to many, results from their versatility. Lego, is in fact, a new toy every day (Hunter & Waddell, 2008, 3, 12). How toy-types like Lego connect with character toys is two-fold; either through their connection with a character license, or the fact that the player may, by utilizing the construction toy, build their own toys – even toys with a face that are of particular interest to this thesis. This explains why some toy categories may have more enduring potential than others, such as whole systems of construction. Some new entries into the global toy market have realized the power endurance in a toy, in reference to a prolonged playing experience. One of these is MakeDo, which markets its product by pointing out its timely charm:

The Kits provide a holistic creative experience for children. Not only do they feel proud of what they’ve made, but also go on to play with it for hours, weeks, and months thereafter. And then when they want to play with something new, MakeDo connectors can be pulled apart and reused to make another creation (MakeDo Press Release, 2012).

The success of a toy may even result in ‘over-consumption’ so that it disappears from the market place altogether: A previously mass-produced, but rediscovered, overtly popular toy will vanish from the market as the quote referring to the original My Little Ponies launched in the 1980s, and taken from one of my interviews illustrates:



KH: How do you find raw material for these characters [toys], pop icons?

Interviewee: Well, I collected My Little Ponies from flea markets before. That G1 model is no longer produced, they were made in the 80s and 90s. But now you can't find them at flea markets anymore, suddenly no one wants to give them up. But again, people send me these quite a lot as donations, which I think is really great. (TA/mk)



Fashion Doll series, 2009

The allure of retro

The toys of yesterday are making a come-back attached with the idea of 'retro', parents want to get their children the same toys they played with themselves.
(TR/ml)

The concern of Nachmanovitz' of a 'detached nonrelation between people and things' is a result of the lack of aesthetics in artefacts. According to the author of *Free Play. Improvisation in Life and Art*, the 'ugliness' of many modern artefacts is not due to the plastics and electronics that they employ being inherently uglier than stone or wood, but because of this detachment (Nachmanovitz, 1990, 150). My research material, on the other hand, tells another story. At least when considering adult toy owners and players, the attachment to the artefacts seems strong enough for the people to take care of these (play)things and to preserve them for future generations. Walsh says that what we give to 'the little ones' in a toy that we once treasured, is a piece of ourselves (Walsh, 2005, xii). If the toy does not endure time for one reason or another, what an adult will do is according to many sources, to try to find similar toys on the market to the one s/he used to have and play with her/himself.

In the fashion industry, like the toy industry, "Everything Old Is New Again". "Retro" properties – hit characters from 10 to 20 years ago – are becoming increasingly popular among today's children and nostalgic collectors. Collectors are primarily interested in "established" properties that can stand the test of time and where emotional connections have already developed (Morency, 2012, 136).¹⁴⁰

In the toy industry, 'retro' comes to have many meanings: According to TIA (Toy Industry Association) trend analysts', retro in the toyworld of today may communicate three dimensions, namely, nostalgia, vintage and classic. Nostalgia deals with the reflective dimensions and attitude towards toys of yesteryear. Vintage, on the other hand, has to do with the styling of products. Finally, classic connects to an established position on the market.¹⁴¹

Toys are discussed with nostalgia in mind in one of Daniel Miller's cases in the book *The Comfort of Things*: One example tells the story of a young couple who have devoted their time to finding the toys of their childhood (vintage Fisher Price toys) to their newborn son. Miller writes: "The intriguing point was that this was not a search for toys as vintage in the sense of antiques. Rather, it was an attempt to locate and buy more or less the exact same toys that Anna... had played with". According to Miller, the couple is revisiting their childhood through toys. The obvious interpretation of this reaching back to the 'authentic' toys of one's own childhood is, that it represents a desire to re-create one's own childhood so that it, can at least on some level, be experienced by the next generation (2008, 143–144). Indeed, toys give us an opportunity to return to occasions past with their ability to trigger memories of lived experiences. When they are acquired once again, as retro toys and given as gifts to new players, what is often expected is that the experiences with the toy will relate to the ones of the original players.

Many of today's parents who lived their childhood in the 1970s like to introduce entertainment such as old movies to their children. Star Wars is one example (Sörbring, 2011). In my opinion, when parents track down the toys they felt attached to in their own childhood, it may well be even more an expression of personal nostalgia than the wish to recreate the toy experience for another person. When returning to some re-introductions of the toys of the past, however, one may not always re-create enthusiasm in the adult player, like in the case of the following interviewee:

¹⁴⁰ One example of collecting activities in relation to established toys are the Cabbage Patch Kids, of which early editions have been re-adopted (in other words re-sold within the doll collector community, for thousands of dollars), see Walsh (2005).

¹⁴¹ TIA, 2013, "Toy Trends Tea Media Briefing", 11.2.2013, New York.

KH: Do you have a favourite toy today?

Interviewee: Yes, those old toys. Of course the ones that you have been playing with yourself, you have a strong connection to those. But contemporary toys – for me it's very difficult to form any kind of contact with them, all those animal characters and all, the My Little Pony of today – it does not look like a horse at all. (TA/mk)

Some companies have still grasped the possibility that the 'allure of retro' may attract new players to the toys of yesterday. As the following quote illustrates, turning away from the (in many cases) technologically enhanced toys of today and towards toy types favoured by earlier generations of toy players, such as dolls, may increase interest towards character toys in general:

I think that there is a percentage of consumers who are turning away from technology and the more adult-oriented toys aimed at their girls, and are turning instead to the more traditional toys of their own childhood (doll entrepreneur Francis Cain in an interview for *Toys'n'Playthings*, May, 2012, 50).

Perhaps the allure of retro does not only result from nostalgia, but simply from the fact of the outstanding quality in character design. For example, Rodney Alan Greenblat writes in Matison's book about Japanese toys that have their origins in TV shows: Many of these toys of yesteryear are still collected today. Some are still even manufactured, even though the original TV series has fallen into obscurity. Greenblat claims that the nostalgia factor is only a small part of what keeps these characters alive. "While many of the characters are fondly remembered, that doesn't account for all of their continued popularity. It is their distinct, imaginative artistry that keeps them fresh, the bright, garish colors, and the crazy combinations of animal, human, machine and even vegetable and mineral" (Matison, 2003, foreword). In Greenblat's thinking then, innovative design is the key in keeping the (toy) characters fresh, and attracting new audiences.



Leisure vs. serious toy play

Play is mostly an agreement and the choice of how you want to spend your time. (TD/dk)

That is, no matter how busy you might be in this realm, obsessively fabricating (or collecting), you are by official measure wasting your time. I guess that is what I like about artist made toys. They are not grand paintings and sculptures. They are by no means formal, rather, they command our attention most with the absurdity of the fact that people are waiting in line and paying big money to own things of such low value (McGormick, 2006, 119).

The wasting of time, that McGormick refers to in the previous passage, is worth paying more attention to. It connects with the discussion of play practices partaken during leisure time. For not only are adults interacting with toys in both the intimate spaces of their homes and in the playgrounds of social media, they are also dedicating their time to toy play during time off from work. Dewey notes that children are not conscious of any opposition between play and necessary work. The idea of the contrast between work and free time for play 'is a product of the adult life in which some activities are reactive

and amusing because of their contrast with work that is infected with laborious care' (Dewey, 1934, 291).

Sunday dolls were sometimes permitted, especially in the families whose theology was on the liberal side. The "Sunday" doll was a very special person, who appeared once a week and, always dressed in her very best, was carefully put away at the proper time (Foley, 1962, 109).

The quote from Foley's book *Toys throughout the Ages* gives one idea about historical attitudes towards toys and how they were perceived as special artefacts that were picked down from their 'pedestals' on special occasions. Today, the child is expected to play with his/her toys at any time, with maybe the exception of the dinner table. In this sense, although equipped with their capacity to function as time machines, toys can also be viewed as 'timeless' – artefacts that do not recognize a 'right time' for their use, not in childhood anyway. Toy culture has changed and although some toys are protected, I presume that it is hard to track down any 'Sunday dolls' today.

The national poet of Finland, Elias Lönnrot, wrote as early as in 1837 that beautiful joys, play and amusements are refreshing. Consumed in moderation, they are good for both body and mind, and get the blood and other bodily fluids going. After leaving work it is suitable for one to amuse herself (Soini, 1991, 4).

In the beginning of the 1900s, Johan Huizinga notes that for an 'adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time"' (Huizinga, 1992, 8). Roger Caillois agrees by saying that play is a free activity and that one only plays if and when one wishes to (1961, 7).

The adult is, at least generally, not expected to play at just any time, but during leisure time, time off from work and with a physical distance to the work space. The time available for play seems to define its character. A study carried out at the University of Michigan showed that the free, unstructured time of children has decreased, 12 hours per week as compared to the situation in the 1970s (Kauhanen 2004). The general attitude is that "we should be having (structured) fun in our leisure time. Otherwise we are wasting it" (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 120). In a way, toy play at any age ceases to be play if it becomes too regulated or exclusively a means to have 'structured fun'. Although toy play in adulthood is about taking an intentional stand towards toys as things for play, what is done with them still needs not to feel forced. As one of my interviewees puts it:

[A toy experience means that] You do something that you do really not have to do. (TD/bk)

The amount of time we use for playing may on the other hand not have an effect on its value. To measure the time dedicated for play is not of importance, according to play researcher, folklorist Reeli Karimäki: The time used for playing does not tell how much the activity means to a child (Karimäki; Kuluttajavirasto 2009). So only a brief moment of time (perhaps this is exactly what is meant by so-called 'quality time') dedicated to play may have significant importance for the player.

In children's play it is normally the adult that forces the play act to end (Hakkarainen, 1991, 51). In the world of adults working time is what limits leisure activities, such as time dedicated to toy play. Work itself is seldom understood as play, as the following quote from a Finnish columnist highlights:

I do understand that in Finland, work cannot be referred to as play. Rather, we say that play is work so that fun can be taken away from all of us. When we then lie on the death bed and we would like to say what we please, we remember what is ok to say. So it was good that I did not play too much in my life. Is this how it goes? (Piha, 2011, English translation by the author).

Karl Groos claims that adult play may result from other things besides surplus energy, namely the need for recreation (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 226). According to Brian Sutton-Smith, the work ethic view of play rests on making a fundamental distinction between play and work. Work is seen as obligatory, sober, serious, and not fun, and play is the direct opposite of these (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 201–202). For the child, playthings became a means to compensate the child for the absence of the adult with a large assortment of toys. Again, for an adult the toy is an unreal key out from reality, into an unattainable, timeless world (Lönnqvist, 1981, 66–67).

According to the empirical data this thesis employs, the wish to spend time with toys and to carry out different recreational activities with them has to do with precisely this; escaping the burden of the working life at least momentarily, in the company of one or more toys. What contemporary adult toy cultures tell about is the growing importance of how people want to spend their leisure time. Also, as we will see in the last part of this chapter, some companies have also integrated toy play in the serious activity of work and hence proving that toys must not only be regarded as artefacts utilized during leisure time. The attitudes towards playing with toys are clearly (but slowly) changing.

What hinders the building of a connection between the notions of leisure time and work maybe most of all, is the thought of play only as a process with no goals and outcomes. In a way, it is in this idea of the non-relation between (free) play and (structured) work – that play is not supposed to have to goals, which again is different from, for example games or sports. In games there is often a clear end to the process and someone is claimed a winner. This applies to sports as well. In playing, the motivations are believed to be intrinsic and autotelic, as described in Chapter 5.¹⁴²

A special characteristic of play is that in play, nothing is transformed in the same way as in a work process, says Hakkarainen (1991, 30). This supposed aimlessness does harm to the understandings of contemporary play. Seen in a negative way, the entertainment, of which toys have inevitably become a part, is in fact, according to this view 'a public system of amusement where anyone who has given up her autonomy may satisfy her urge to play. The increasing amount of leisure time has given people a principled chance to develop themselves, but as Karkama sees this, it is controlled by the forces behind the entertainment industry (1981, 22).

In my analysis of contemporary toy play, the different motivations to play do not seem to reduce playing to an aimless, and thus unproductive, activity. As we will see in the following chapters, toys are used in a multitude of ways which make it possible to see toy play as well as a creative and productive activity. Although the motivations for toy play may not be as clearly articulated as for work, sports or playing games, there will be results and outcomes. As toy play is, from the beginning, an activity related to manipulation of the material, this means that the outcomes of toy play can also sometimes include material dimensions. In sum, the time used with toys does in fact mean, that something is transformed in the process, as is generally the thought when addressing the motivations of working.

In the light of these thoughts toys may also be utilized as tools for innovative work. One may easily build prototypes out of toys. For example, by using Lego, a company may turn to 'serious play' that aims at transforming existing ways of thinking. David Gauntlett explains: 'Lego Serious Play also exists as a consultancy for businesses and organizations, developed by the Lego Group in collaboration with some very good academic researchers':

Lego Serious Play begins with the idea that 'the answers are already in the room'. It gets participants communicating more fully, creatively and

¹⁴²What is of interest to the researcher in connection with this development, is the growing trend of co-operative games, where the ideas and goals of social play are becoming a more appreciated aspect of playing than the classic aims of the necessity of having to have *one* winner in a game.

expressively, by asking them to 'play' in a focused way, with Lego. Specifically, team members are asked to build metaphors of their organizational identities and experiences using Lego bricks.' (In "Creative and visual methods for exploring identities – A conversation between David Gauntlett and Peter Holzwarth" accessed at <http://www.artlab.org.uk/VS-interview-2ps.pdf>.)

To conclude this chapter, I will quote Michael Schrage, author of *Serious Play. How the world's best companies stimulate to innovate*: 'Serious play is about improvising with the unanticipated in ways that create new value. Any tools, technologies, techniques, or toys that let people improve how they play seriously with uncertainty is guaranteed to improve the quality with innovation' (Schrage, 2000). This means that toys can be used for many purposes even in the framework of time; they can be played with to lose track of time, to make the most of time and both during leisure and work time. Overall, it is important to see that compared to immaterial, free play, playing with toys will irrevocably transform our thinking, our material environment or ideas about identity and the self. Playing with toys at any age, affords the possibility to develop capacities, views on our social environment and moreover, enable identity work. These lines of thinking will be explored further in the next chapter.



Doppelgänger series, 2011

Chapter 9: Toys and identity

In our play we reveal what kind of people we are.

- Ovid, Roman poet (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.)

Toys. They reveal what we believe and value, encourage and endorse and dismiss and fear. They remind us who we were, who we are, and who we hope to become.

- The Strong Museum of Play

In the following chapter I will discuss toys in relation to the playthings' affordance as a tool for playing with the dimensions of the identity, in other words the playing self. As we have seen earlier, toy play may happen both on various playgrounds in culture and in relation to space and time. Furthermore, when interacting with a toy character, the player may, in fact, also be playing with 'the self'.

Toys as a category of objects will then afford the discussion and 'toying with' topics such as meanings of the face, gender and the uncanny, and artefacts that in can be perceived to have the power to function as our avatars. The proposition is first, that human beings bond with toys such as dolls, action figures and soft toys because of their ability to possess something that resembles human facial features. Additionally, we may identify ourselves with different toys because of their capability to be either gender neutral or because they seem to represent a certain gender. Moreover, society has its saying about what is appropriate as a play pattern for boys and for girls. This is something that is then used by the toy industry in order to group and categorize potential players. Toys also allow us to explore the dark dimensions of human behaviour and experience. Finally, we may identify so closely with toys that they become extensions of ourselves; alter egos, mini-me's or avatars in online environments.

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify yet another dimension of toys as potential artefacts, by looking at them and play behaviour related to them through the lens of universal, and on the other hand regional human behaviour. This will pave the way for the next chapter, in which the adult toy player profiles will be discussed in more depth. 'A key to understanding what possessions mean', as Crossley writes, is in 'recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as a part of ourselves' (Crossley, 2003, 39). It is no wonder then that toys come to represent ourselves in many ways. Toys, as our possession, paint the picture of what perhaps is an idealized 'me' either through visual ways i.e. as artefacts that speak of our preferences and style, or as actual mini-versions of ourselves in their most perfect, toyish way. To play is to play a role, to play with a toy is to take this further and finally,

to play with others is to share this role-playing with other people. ‘Collective fantasy requires even stronger commitment to these versions of the self’, reminds Henricks (2006, 131). The way I see this, is that people do pay attention to what they are playing with as this is something that connects with ideas about who they are, in themselves.

Play affords a possibility to re-create oneself. Children’s play, according to Kline, is distancing from daily experience and the re-creation of self in an imaginary world (1993, 59–60). On the other hand, to play with a toy is to enter a representational space, the embodiment of an idea (Phoenix, 2006, 7).

Again, as Niinimäki points out, ‘other-oriented values mean the acceptance of others that the user will gain through this object’.¹⁴³ In sum, we can use play to create new versions of ourselves in our imaginations. Or we can play with a toy to make a representation of something, even using the toy as an *avatar*. By using certain toys in our play we may gain acceptance from peer groups of players.

The romantic view of the puppet as a representational figure (Tiffany, 2000, 65) endures. In dolls, action figures and soft toys we may, for one reason or another, see ourselves and others we know. In playing with these toys we can thus play out wishes and dreams of not only what we would like to be, but who we actually are.

Everyone brings to the [toy]play her own self, her own thoughts and ways of acting. Everyone uses the toy [...] in her own way and creates her fantasy. Very often toys are used in different ways than the toy designers think. [...] never do those toy stories [back stories] move into play as they are. (TR/rk)

When a toy is played with, it becomes more “charged”, more filled with the personality of the owner. As Phoenix writes, ‘a toy absorbs and re-enacts plans, secrets, ambitions, and desires, it becomes the essential part of the owner, both carrier of and link back to intense personal experience’ (2006, 7). Seen in this light, play is very serious identity work (Berg, 1996, 143). The reason for human beings to play in this way – to move into an illusory world where we pretend with toys as our props – is because we are, in fact, trying to understand something we have not been able to master in real life (Smith, 2010).

When analyzing the capacities of the contemporary toy types that I employ in the thesis, it becomes possible to see similarities. Actually, when discussing the identity work that goes on in toy play activities, the division between dolls, action figures and soft toys becomes unnecessary. For they are in fact all *types of dolls*, as they come with a face, a body, limbs and in this way – a designed personality.

¹⁴³ See Niinimäki, 2011, 52, orig. Jacobs, D. (2007) *Adding Values. The Cultural Side of Innovation*. ArtEZ Press, Arnhem.



Doll

2. a. An image of a human being (commonly of a child or lady) used as a plaything; a girl’s toy-baby. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Doll play [...] It is an invitation to power, a key that unlocks human agency and creativity. Doll play is interactive and multivalent. Dolls may provide a socially acceptable personality, an outlet for unsanctioned feelings, an act of rebellion, and a means of stepping outside the approved societal model. A doll can be a projection of who you are not supposed to be, a testing of opposites, a tugging of dual and contradictory roles (Bado-fraick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 160).

To be able to understand how the serious identity work, as described in the introduction of this chapter, is realized through toy play, we must begin to explore what humans and character toys have in common. As stated, besides dolls, all action figures and soft toys that have a face are in fact *dolls*. The reason for not using this common term for the three categories is that in contemporary consumer culture, dolls have come to mean toys that are most often targeted to girls and women.

In other words, if a toy company wishes to reach a mass-audience of the other gender, it must use the strategy of calling their toy something else, like an action figure. Soft toys, in many cases, are from the beginning gender neutral. Before moving on to questions directly addressing gender-related issues in contemporary toy culture, let us use some pages to ponder upon dolls – toys with a face, that afford among other things, toying with the self and identity.

In the narrowest sense, writes King, ‘I would define a doll as a representation of the human figure to be played with as a toy by a child’ (King, 1977, 1) The doll is the most typical of girls’ toys (Römpötti, 2012). Dolls are still where little girls first see themselves (Auerbach, 2011, 198). According to Fleming, dolls have been a revealing sign of how adults have viewed children (Fleming, 1996, 87). One might add, that contemporary dolls are still a revealing sign, of not only of how adults view children, but how adults view the world around them, viewing children, adults, seniors, animals, etc. Dolls as a category represent a vast array of different doll-related toys: In the study of Nelson and Nilsson conducted in Swedish nurseries, the category of dolls consisted of baby dolls, adult dolls, rag dolls, doll clothes, make-up heads, cosmetics, doll houses and furniture, kitchen utensils, cleaning equipment, telephones, doll cribs and doll prams (2002, 49). In the following, I will concentrate on contemporary dolls, leaving vehicles and larger accessories out of the analysis.

The child playing with the doll raises the lifeless thing temporarily to the place of a symbol of life. He lends the doll his own soul whenever he answers a question for it: he lends to it his feelings, conceptions and aspirations [...]

(Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 203).

‘From dolls girls (and boys) learn to socialize, take care of one another, and release emotions. Dolls promote creative play between children at different stages’ (Auerbach, 2004, 69).

Playing with dolls has not been affected so much by technological developments in the toy category, such as the arrival and popular response to so-called smart toys. Doll entrepreneur Francis Cain believes that ‘children will always continue to play with dolls as they see them not as a doll, but as a friend and companion and confidante’ (an interview for *Toys n’ Playthings*, May, 2012, 50).

Dolls, unlike other playthings, have always been recognized by adults as having special significance to their owners, writes Newson. Most of the oldest ‘dolls’ still surviving in museums were in fact never children’s toys at all, nor were intended to be, but were made and used for religious and magical purposes (1979, 87).

Playing with dolls at adult age is seldom addressed in toy-related literature, with the exception of collecting as a form of play. Auerbach argues that adults value dolls as collectible art. Additionally, she states, that seniors like the younger children, find comfort in the huggable qualities of a doll (Auerbach, 2011, 198). Classical play theorists, such as Piaget, do not see adult audiences as potential doll players. Instead, Piaget argues that games with rules are almost the only forms of play that persist at the adult stage (1958, 148). The early history of dolls in any case points more to that it was the adults, who the dolls were originally made for, not children. However, they were not playthings as according in the modern sense, but ceremonial artefacts:

Some writers have attempted to trace the ancestry of dolls [...] and suggest that it was a general practice to give children out-moded idols to play with, as is the custom in some tribes of North American Indians, whose ‘Kachina’ dolls are used first in adult ceremonies and then as playthings (Culff, 1969, 12).

Fashion dolls, one of the most popular categories of dolls in contemporary toy culture, were devised by Parisian costumiers as early as the 14th century (Daiken, 1963, 108). Today, although contested in the past years, the Barbie doll remains one of the most popular fashion dolls of all time. Most of us know Barbie through our own or our friend’s, sister’s or even mother’s play activities. Although the birth of Barbie is an interesting story, there is no need to repeat it in this context. Nevertheless, Barbie continues to dominate the doll category of mass-markets in the western world. While baby dolls are about caring for someone else, the Barbie doll is about caring for your aspirations (del Vecchio, 2003, 94). However, we must not forget that Barbie’s profession was originally a fashion model. A history of the doll presents, at the same time a history of fashion (Fritsch & Bachmann, 1968, 69).

In Japan, other dolls have kept Barbie almost out from the marketplace, writes Allison. One of them is Ricca – a favourite doll of many Japanese women growing up in the 1980s and 1990s. Allison claims that Barbie has never soared in Japan because if a doll looks too real, people feel uncomfortable. Barbie dolls are, according to Allison, “real life” and Ricca dolls “cute” (Allison, 2006, 145–146).

The history of dolls is full of curiosities; events and strange artefacts which in one way or another may still inspire contemporary doll design. One example is the Charlotte doll, more accurately Frozen Charlotte or Charlie. The porcelain doll, which design was inspired (according to folklore) by a true story. According to the legend, young Charlotte died horse riding on her way to a New Year’s Eve Ball because her clothing wasn’t warm

enough on a freezing winter night. The production of Charlotte dolls started in the 1800s and its various formats have served practical purposes as pudding dolls (like an almond is used in Finnish Christmas porridge), as heat conductors in place of spoons or as their largest version as champagne coolers (Vihervä, 2011, 11).

These days, a doll is not just a representation of a child or an adult. It carries 'strong ideological content and powerful messages about what is expected of females and what females in turn should expect', says Varney (1996, 186). Dolls are, in other words, directly related to the social and cultural background in which they evolve (Rossie, 1996, 34). For example U.S. designers of dolls have always glorified light skin, blond hair, blue eyes, tiny noses and thin lips (Seiter, 1995, 136).

In 2002, the *Economist* wrote: 'Girls now grow out of traditional play patterns, such as playing with dolls, earlier than they did in the past' (*Economist*, 2002). In 2011, however, according to Stevanne Auerbach a.k.a. Dr. Toy, the role of dolls and doll play has expanded (2011, 196). The doll market grew by 10% in value and 8% in volume for December. Fashion-themed dolls constitute the largest category in the doll market, and it continued to grow by 21% increase on last year (NPD Group, Monthly Summary December 2011).

Although not a fashion doll series, The Cabbage Patch Kids toys go on record as the most successful new doll introduction in the history of the toy industry (Monks, 2011, 214).

As a child, I played with many kinds of dolls. One of my favourite dolls was – and still is – a Cabbage Patch Kids doll named Sofi (a name that came with the adoption papers in the package). Sofi landed in Finland at precisely the time of my 9th Birthday. She was one of the first dolls that came to the country alongside the doll that my sister received. One of the most special memories tied to this doll was the fact that my father had gone into serious lengths to ensure that I got the doll for my birthday – before anyone of my friends had even heard of such a doll. To be one of the first owners of a Cabbage Patch Doll made me feel proud and special. I still have Sofi.

Dolls that have become popular in the western societies during the last decade adhere the idea of cute. Fashion dolls tend to draw inspiration from Japanese aesthetic familiar from manga and anime. This style favours large eyes and street-savvy clothing, and has manifested at least in Bratz and Pullip dolls. Bratz is a mass-marketed doll brand with fans of different ages. The 30 cm tall Pullip dolls that come with a large head, moving eyes and ball-jointed limbs are favoured more by an older audience, probably due to both their delicate structure and relatively high price class (in Finland some 140€ for a doll, see Paakkunainen, 2012, 30).

The concept of fashion dolls has expanded widely and wildly in the 21st century.¹⁴⁴ One recent example of dolls that not only resonate with who is who in the contemporary world of fashion, but also can be seen as 'fashionable dolls' are the 'Mua Mua dolls, fashion's latest toy craze' (see <http://www.muamudadolls.com> accessed in March 2012).



Here come the mua mua dolls: fun crochet dolls, caricatures of the most en vogue characters of the moment and of the past, ranging from Elvis to Lady Gaga to Kate and William. From the fashion world, meet the little clones of Miuccia Prada, Valentino, the late Lee McQueen and Karl Lagerfeld (who apparently asked to have his one commissioned). Last arrivals also include Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier (See <http://www.muamudadolls.com>).

Obama & Michelle On the Top of the World, artwork by Lavonne Sallee, photographed at the Altered Barbie exhibition in San Francisco, 2012.

Most dolls of today come with a complete face; a set of eyes, a nose and a mouth.¹⁴⁵ There are exceptions, however, particularly concerning characters that are made into soft toys and action figures. It is appropriate to refer to Hello Kitty again – a character that has influenced the toy industry on a global level since the beginning of the 21st century. Yuko Yamaguchi, chief designer of Sanrio, states in an article published in The New York Times that in most Sanrio characters such as Hello Kitty a mouth is not used to express emotion. Cute is expressed in the form (body) of the toy, and its face. As a toy design book from the 1970s illustrates, most toy characters today would fit into the group of the 'hunted':

¹⁴⁴ The celebrity doll is a category of its own. Through the years when conducting this study, I have seen many toy imitations of celebrities such as Prince Charles and Lady Di in their wedding clothing, a photograph of a parodied toy version of Silvio Berlusconi, and heard that a doll of Steve Jobs after the deceased Apple president is on its way.

¹⁴⁵ Eyes of dolls as a key feature of the face are particularly important. The eyes and face structure of a doll may in some cases be 'what makes them stand out from other dolls' as in the case of the Rubens Barn dolls, see Rubens Barn catalogue 2013.

Eyes are the important part of a toy, they add character and expression to the finished work. It is, therefore, interesting to note that one can divide animals living in their natural habitat into two groups – the hunted and the hunter. One will realize from books on animals that the hunted creatures have their eyes set well into the side of the head, almost in the “cheek” and their ears are usually slightly turned back to listen out for the footsteps of the pursuer. Rabbits are typical examples of these animals. The hunter, on the other hand, has a clear set of eyes looking sharply ahead of him and ears pointing towards its prey. Cats belong to this group (Sarigny, 1971, 47).

Mouthlessness is, according to Yamaguchi, one reason for Hello Kitty’s popularity (Lubow, 2005). Kelts does not forget the white cat either. He claims that Hello Kitty has no story and even if she did, she has no mouth through which to tell it (2007, 106). Indeed, the soul of a doll is in its eyes (Huuskonen, 2012, 10), like in contemporary characters in general. As a recent study accordingly demonstrates, eyes are particularly important for Eastern Asian people, in other words, the Japanese. Let us use an example to strengthen the argument. Smileys are culturally different: Eastern Asian people use e.g. the following signs to communicate joy, sadness, grief and surprise¹⁴⁶:

(^_^) (T_T) (:_;) (o.o)

Whereas Eastern Asian people change first and foremost (see above) the ‘eyes’, westerners change the look of the mouth (see below).

:) :(:o

In their study of facial expressions, researchers Jack et al found out, that they are not culturally universal, as assumed earlier. According to their recent study, cross-cultural comparisons of the mental representations challenge universality on two separate accounts. They write “first, whereas westerners represent each of the six basic emotions with a distinct set of facial movements common to the group, Easterners do not. Second, Easterners represent emotional intensity with distinctive dynamic eye activity. In other words, emotions are expressed using culture-specific facial signals” (Jack et al, 2012). Although research shows that there are cultural differences in facial expressions,

¹⁴⁶ See Mäenpää, Petri (2012) “Ilme on kulttuurista kiinni”, [The expression depends on culture] *Helsingin Sanomat*, 22.5.2012, D1.

this does not mean that the inspiration for toy design would limit itself to one part of the world. As we have seen, current trends still point to preferences in anime and manga styles. Anime Style editor Hideki Ono says (in Kelts, 2007, 214) that Japanese expressionism is defined by subtraction: “A pretty or cute girl is drawn with huge eyes down to the eyelashes, but the ears are not shown. The eyes are big for sensitivity. The men are drawn as smooth-skinned and clean, but also very strong – the key is finding the balance.” The eyes of the doll, large or small, enable it to look back:

Gwen White, in her scholarly book of dolls for collectors, points out that ‘The collecting of dolls is different from collecting inanimate objects such as plates or lace, for dolls when looked at look back, and many hoard dolls simply because they cannot bear the idea of parting with them’ (Newson, 1979, 89).

Conclusively, a face of the toy has an important meaning for most toy players, for it makes us see the human in the non-human. Therefore, it is easy to bond with the toy, but sometimes hard to part ways with it, as Gwen White writes of doll collectors.

In this passage I have attempted to elaborate on one of the most important human features, namely the face. Furthermore, I have argued that all of the toys in the category of action figures and soft toys are in fact doll types, but are not referred to as such, because of the idea that dolls are only meant to be acquired and played by girls and women. I do not support this stereotypical thinking myself, and would like to go on to discuss the human dimension of gender in the following.



Sculptor Kim Simonsson shows that eyes play an important role when constructing a character’s face, be it a bambi character or a manga-inspired boy/girl sculpture, 2009.



The Grin, 2012

Before concluding this part of the chapter, I would like to return once more to the subject of action figures per se, in order to connect them, in particular, with the discussion of the face and its meanings. Sara Sundell, who is an expert on gender-based education methods, also makes the same note that dolls for boys are not called dolls but action figures. What is particularly interesting in Sundell's notion is that she has discovered action figures to often have a serious face and thus, do not encourage the player to discuss, care or consolidate the toy (Raivio, 2012, 13). On the other hand, this may result in the ways these two doll types are manipulated and again, how the whole category of these action 'dolls' continues to be proposed to belong to a certain gender and a certain way of playing.



The Eyes, 2012

Toys that reflect violence, sexism, racism and stereotypical thinking promote these values, say Ladensohn Stern and Schoenhaus (1990, 187). The toys that promote violence or negative social, racial, or gender stereotypes are not recommended for children (Danette & Romano, 2003, 911). Still they exist on the market – as toys for boys and toys for girls. In the following part, I will go on to address and discuss the topic of gender in relation to toys and toy play.



Arts & crafts, 2012.

Addressing gender

As we have learned from our own childhood, the market for toys is clearly divided between items that target boys and on the other hand girls as toy consumers. Most toy stores are divided into girls' and boys' compartments. One of the most obvious visual cues of this division is the colouring of products: The boys' section utilizes black, silver, blue, bright red and green, while girls' toys most often belong to the colour scheme including pastels and pink. The market sticks to these, on the one hand to make it easier for the retail sector to group and categorize the toys. On the other hand, toy companies may not know better, because this is 'what has always been done'. This applies also to the toy types that are suggested for boys and girls, which the following quote demonstrates quite well:

Girls' toys include dolls and doll accessories, some crafts, and beyond the preschool years, stuffed animals. Typically considered boys' toys are action-figure lines, toy guns and other weapons, toy vehicles, noneducational electronic games, and some crafts, such as models (Ladensohn Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990, 200).

Toys for girls are almost invariably associated with the realm of the home, children and beautifying. Dolls, dollhouses, toy kitchens and fairy costumes clearly show the expectations girls face when they grow up (Of Toys and Men, exhibition press materials).

Dolls are a girl thing, guns are for boys. The exhibition layout and materials, as shown in the toy exhibit *Of Toys and Men* displayed in Helsinki Tennis Palace in spring 2012, still show this conservative way of thinking. The curators Bruno Girveau and Dorothee Charles point out that toys are always conservative (Römpötti, 2012). Against this line of thought is the idea of seeing player behaviour itself as subversive, as will be discussed in association with the next chapter. This means that although toys would in some way communicate conservative values, these can be challenged by playing with the toys. In which ways then, do toys themselves promote gender-oriented ideas about play? 'Sexless, like children's dolls', wrote the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his "Puppen" in 1947.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ See *Five Prose Pieces*, trans. Carl Niemyer (1947) Cummington Press, Cummington, Mass., 16 cited in Fox and Landshoff, 1973.

Looking at the dolls of those times, especially the ones depicting children, it is sometimes hard to tell which gender they represent. For a person experiencing her childhood in the 1970s and 1980s, a sexless doll was something that simply did not satisfy the player. In my case, I literally had to design the affordance (of seeing the doll to have a gender) on my own:

As a child, I gained possession of a seemingly genderless, blond-haired doll that had once belonged to my mother. After becoming frustrated with its sexless nature, I deliberately draw genitals on the doll and at this time, deciding its faith for good. The doll finally belonged to a category, officially became a he, and was entitled to a boy's name. The enterprise seemed fully appropriate at the time, but whenever I have seen the doll at adult age, I have wanted to see it clothed, my obnoxious design out of sight.

So the question of gender extends beyond the gender of the player and on the other hand, the possible gender given to the toy by the designer.¹⁴⁸

As one excerpt from my interviews shows, sometimes the ideas that the players connect with the gender of the toy character are particularly strong. In fact so strong, that the toy owner does not want anyone to be confused about which gender the toy represents:

Little-A's best friend is Höppänä, a toy monkey [Monchichi, originating from the 80s]. Both Höppänä and Little-A have always had very old clothes. Mom has sewn clothes for them, and last winter I decided to have this kind of overalls sewn for both Little-A and Höppänä. There were some problems in the shop because I had to remind them several times about Höppänä – who [then] had girls clothes on and who is a boy – should be put in trousers [in order to not to have to wear girls clothes anymore]. (TP/ap)

Nowadays, it is hard to come by a mass-produced doll that would does not exhibit clear signs of gender either in its physical representation or at least in its clothing. The same goes for action figures. When considering soft toys, on the other hand, the development is in most cases the opposite.

As Foley notes in his book *Toys Throughout the Ages* written in the early 1960s, 'practically all the dolls that have come down to us from the past are females, and even today only about one in twelve manufactured is a male' (1962, 27).

¹⁴⁸ See i.e. www.uglydolls.com where clues are given as to which gender the characters represent.

As Constance King noted in her book *The Collector's History of Dolls*, about porcelain dolls: Very few male dolls were made. Many heads were made that could be used on a doll dressed as a girl or a boy (1977, 298). Nowadays, the question of gender in doll-design is an important one.

The Barbie doll, notes Kline, 'is possibly the best example of gender-specific symbolic design'. In the time of its launch, however, the doll stood for ideas that were not formerly tied with dolls; the ones of mothering and family that that had until then defined doll play (Kline, 1993, 251). Instead, Barbie was, from the start marketed as a career girl and thought of as a plaything on which the player could reflect her own aspirations on. In the play of girls, claims Jones, Barbie also functions remarkably often as an action heroine (2002, 80).¹⁴⁹ Curiously, one of the most popular action figures, namely G.I. Joe originally was conceived as a doll – a 'Barbie for boys' (Ladensohn Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990, 112).

Preferences for gender-linked toys seem to emerge in children before any sense of gender identity, writes Goldstein. Children as young as eight months may already show preferences for toys targeted either to boys or girls (Goldstein, 2012, 19, 21). Some research suggests, that there are reasons for why the two genders are drawn to different kinds of toys. For example, there is evidence that male vervet monkeys prefer to play with "boy" toys (car and ball) and female monkeys with "girl" toys (doll and a pot) which suggests that human object play may also been shaped by sexually differentiated selection processes.¹⁵⁰ The study of Alexander and Charles (2009) shows that even adult males and females display preferences for male-typical and female-typical toys. According to Goldstein, males – both human and nonhuman – are attracted to toys that move (Goldstein, 2012, 3). According to a study conducted in the 1960s, infant girls prefer toys with faces.¹⁵¹

Another factor that sustains the belief that different gender preferences really exist is the marketing of toys. In the 'snapshots of play' Kline writes about them, children are 'shown simply manipulating plastic characters in accord with the highly stereotypic patterns of narrative assigned to the particular characterization. In this respect, advertising and life can said to reflect each other very accurately' (1993, 337).

¹⁴⁹ The Ken doll is sometimes merely seen as an accessory to Barbie, not even a person with a potential back story. (This idea seems to be supported by popular cultural narratives about the toys, see e.g. *Toy Story 3*).

¹⁵⁰ See Alexander & Hines, 2002 in Burghardt, 2005, 164; orig. Alexander, G. M. & Hines, M. (2002) "Sex differences in response to children's toys in nonhuman primates (*Cercopithecus aethiops sabaeus*)" in *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 23, 467-479.

¹⁵¹ See Goldberg, S. & Lewis, M. (1969) "Play behaviour in the year-old infant: Early sex differences". *Child Development*, 40, 21-31.

Although toys tell their own story about gender-related values, gender differences are less closely prescribed in some modern societies, as Smith argues (2010, 88). On the other hand, however, children are more readily accepted by their peers when they play with “sex appropriate” toys, writes Goldstein (1995, 129).

Girls play more often with boys’ toys than the other way around (Römpötti, 2012). Children also come to develop their own gender identity, and observe what males and females do in their culture. They then consciously choose to carry out gender-appropriate activities (Smith, 2010, 136).

The idea of the separate categories of boys’ and girls’ playing patterns is enrooted in our cultural history. In a Finnish book on play, published in 1928, I found the following quote: “As natural as it is for boys to play with toy horses or bulls or war, it is just as natural that the playthings of girls are dolls and cows and their play doings are household chores” (Enäjärvi, 1928, 274). As play patterns are linked as ‘naturally’ belonging to a gender, it is no surprise that the toy industry keeps producing and promoting toys specifically for boys and girls. Still, as we have come to see, there are some toy-types that are seen as more gender-neutral.

One of the most well-known toy objects of all time is the teddy bear. It is the kind of a soft toy that is considered a ‘boy toy’ as much as a plaything that is adopted by girls and women. According to Singer and Singer, boys at the preschool level do still adopt plush toys, such as fabric Winnie-the-Poohs, as transitional objects (2007, 117). In the beginning of the 1960s, Foley wrote: “Little boys quickly turn to a favorite stuffed animal which has somewhat the same association for them that a doll has for girls” (Foley, 1962, 27).

Soft toys such as teddy bears still seem to communicate ideas about nurturing, that are OK for boys to toy with, as previous literature on the subject seems to suggest. ‘Unlike the doll, ‘long linked with girls’ gender role-playing, the bear has had wild and primitive “boyish” associations, thus making it appropriate for male companionship’ (Cross, 2004, 53). Recent toy types – ‘the teddy bears of today’, as some might call them – such as technologically enhanced toys seem to have gained the interest of both boys and girls, as both have played with electronic nurturant toys like Tamagochi or Furby. Although both girls and boys clearly play with toys (and as we will see later, so do women and men), new launches in girls toys seem to be more fewer in numbers than is the case for boys’ toys. According to Seiter, innovations in girls’ toys are relatively rare (Seiter, 1995, 150). Outside of dolls and plush toys, few categories have been able to capture a large girl audience, Benezra and Hogan note. They write: ‘Some say the problem lies in a male-dominated industry that’s only learning to market to girls. Another is the accepted paradigm that girls will play with boys toys but not vice-versa’.

For example, Lego has had little success in attracting girls to their building sets (Benezra & Hogan, 1995). In 2011 Lego launched a pastel-coloured series of characters and building sets, Lego Friends. This pink world of play seems to follow the pathways of Barbie by seeing the girls as players with traditional playing patterns related to home decoration and nurturing.

Toys for girls are almost invariably associated with the realm of the home, children and beautifying. Dolls, dollhouses, toy kitchens and fairy costumes clearly show the expectations girls face when they grow up (Of Toys and Men, exhibition press materials).

Thematically, “toys for boys generally advocate speed, adventure and experimentation, whereas girls’ attention is directed towards nurture and housekeeping” (Of Toys and Men, exhibition press materials). When looking at the gender-specific toys from a purely material viewpoint, it becomes clear that boys’ toys have traditionally been manufactured to be sturdier than girls’ toys (Kettunen, 2012, 15).

Action figures in most cases represent men. For example, Star Wars figures are used for other play scenarios besides the manuscripts introduced in the films and video games. But it is about technology, anthropomorphized robots and mostly male characters that the stories employ, notes a professor in pedagogy (Sörbringer, 2011). Another example proves, however, that some toys are of equal interest to both genders: Pokémon, like its precursor Tamagotchi, proved interesting to girls as well as boys, notes Seiter (2007, 83). “Kindergarten”, wrote Vivian Gussin Paley, “is a triumph of sexual self-stereotyping” (Jones, 2002, 77). But research says that there is a good reason for this; that children are more readily accepted by their peers when they play with “sex appropriate” toys (Goldstein, 1995, 129). In Finland, two thirds of all toys are purchased by women aged 24–44 years (Riihonen, 1991, 139). Hence, it seems that the women, as mothers and carers have a lot to say about what kind of playing culture is supported and sustained in reference to toys.

Where the ideas about gender-appropriate toys comes from is not only the home environment but also the media. Media exposure ensures that children get new material upon which to build make-believe and toy-related fantasy play (Singer & Singer, 2007, 165–166). At the same time it promotes ideas about who should play with what. Popular media is also what affects adult toy play. Although it does not regulate either toys or play as gender-specific artefacts and activities as is the case with children, certain attitudes towards gender do prevail. For example, in fan studies, it is noted that being a fan is not a question of gender-neutrality.

Fandom is not gender neutral, but affected by the same order and hierarchies of gender as other areas of life. But, as Kovala and Saesma note, fandom allows the possibility of breaking boundaries, to trying out different identities and across, for example, stereotypes related to gender. Fandom does not define the human identity as a whole (2003, 18–20). As I see it, toy play as an example of a fannish activity affords the same possibility of breaking stereotypes, for example ideas about what is suitable for which gender etc. One example of these fannish activities that in my view break traditional ideas about toys, toy players and gender has to do with My Little Pony figures and adult men:

The fans of the series call themselves 'bronies' [a combination of brothers and ponies]. The brony community consists mainly of men as women are in the minority. What attracts men to the pony [My Little Pony] series is its positive take on life (von Herzen, 2012, C1).

By looking at play cultures surrounding contemporary toys, it also becomes possible to see that certain toy types attract a specific gender, although not exclusively. Vartanian writes about designer toys, which are also sometimes referred to as vinyl culture: 'What have come to be understood as staples of the urban vinyl culture are one element of a larger matrix that communicates the reality of an entire generation, albeit a generation primarily of males' (Vartanian, 2006, 6).

Another example of contemporary toys and their possible attractiveness regarding gender, are the aforementioned Uglydolls, which, according to Majorie Taylor, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon, could be subtly signaling "I'm for boys." 'The dolls' faces (Uglies don't smile, but some show teeth or stick out their tongues) may tell boys they're kindred spirits' (McNeil, 2008). As we see here, although subtle, the design of a toy may in one way or another give the player clues about questions related to gender that inevitably enter the sphere of play. Questions related to gender in character toys may, however, be challenged in play. Therefore, identities are toyed with not only when considering the player, but also when considering the toy.



Tokidoki comes together with Pullip in hybrid fashion, 2013.



The skull has become an important element of many 'dark' toys. It is often toned down by using the 'cute' as in these Furrybones toy characters, photographed at the Licensing Show in Las Vegas, 2012.

Playing with/against evil

Monsters! Monsters! Monsters! So bothersome, yet so essential. Without these terrors, none of the shows would have any conflict. No conflict = no fun. [...]. The monsters even have their very own type of toy collectors, called kaiju (monster) collectors (Matison, 2003).

When considering contemporary toys and (identity) play with them, it is crucial to pay attention to yet another dimension of the toy – namely, the uncanny. In this sub-chapter, we will take a closer look at what it means to play with and against evil with toys. We will therefore visit what I have chosen to call the 'uncanny valley of toys' to pay homage to both Ernst Jentsch's concept of the uncanny and to Mashashiro Mori, who wrote

the article "The Uncanny Valley", published in 1970. Sigmund Freud also utilized the concept of the uncanny in his article "The Uncanny" (1919).¹⁵²

Freud shows how the *unheimlich* – the uncanny – emerges etymologically from its exact opposite, from the *heimlich*: the intimate, the homely, the private. Through a process of a slippage, a word that designates the most homelike and friendly affect turns into its ugly opposite: the weird, the eerie, the decidedly not homey (Ivy, 2010, 15).

Eberle writes about the uncanny as something that lies just outside the boundary of play. 'The disquieting, unnerving, spooky, and somewhat sickly sensation contrasts with the pleasure and ease we feel at play; beginning to feel unnerved and spooked is to start to feel the sense of play draining away...the words describe the odd sense that arises from an encounter with an object that looks real enough to be real, or that moves realistically enough to seem real, but that is nevertheless not real or that seems not quite real' (Eberle, 2009, 168). In contemporary toys, the concept of uncanny, relates to both their design and play patterns.

One interviewee told me about how she once received a doll's head, with no body. The head ended up in the trash (ATD/al). We can probably all imagine how eerie it must have seemed for the interviewee in question to only receive a doll's head with no body attached. (On the other hand, it might have been even creepier to receive the body of the toy with no head).

In the following, I will further elaborate on how the uncanny applies to both contemporary toys and the play with them. There seems to be something very appealing about what is considered dangerous, if not downright evil in play. One of the reasons for this may be that in play, we are entitled to explore our dark side with or without toys. As will be shown, the uncanny is a handy notion when looking at both play and toys for in every case there will be someone, who sees some forms of play to be in some sense wicked, outside of what is considered 'right'.

¹⁵² "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al. (Hogarth, London, 1955), 217–256; or in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985), 335–376. See: http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf. Mashishiro Mori writes in his article published in 1970 "The Uncanny Valley": "[S]light variations in movement can cause a robot, puppet, or prosthetic hand to tumble down in the uncanny valley," cited in Eberle, 2009, 175–176. In the context of this thesis, the uncanny comes to refer to the aesthetics of the contemporary toy characters that do *not move* by themselves.



Vampires and zombies are currently utilized as inspirational thematic material for toy design as these visual examples illustrate, 2011.

As illustrated many times in this thesis, as designers we cannot know beforehand what the player will do with the toy in the name of play. Sutton-Smith says that it is dangerous to pretend that we know what a child will do with a toy based on its characteristics alone because children have a way of doing things with toys over and beyond the apparent character of the toy (Sutton-Smith, 1986). As Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris note, 'play itself can be aggressive, or even violent. There is a sinister side to play that the romantic and idealistic view of play does not always consider' (2010, 132).

In his thesis on emotional design, Pieter Desmet says that it would be naïve to assume that to serve the well-being of humans one should design products to elicit only pleasant emotions. Instead, it may be more interesting to design products that elicit 'paradoxical emotions', that is, positive and negative emotions simultaneously. The products that use this strategy of design may result in 'unique, innovative, rich and interesting' (2002, 192).



The Tokidoki character has something to say, 2013.

The toys of today have come to communicate attitude, spunk and subcultural styles of a darker, morbid nature. Skulls, dark colors and gothic accessories have found their way to Toyland.

Fashion is inspired by art and, again, functions as a source of visual stimuli for design, including toy design. The skulls once made popular by fashion icon Alexander McQueen, Tim Burton, and controversially received contemporary artist Damien Hirst (known e.g. for his famous art work *For the Love of God*, 2007) have made their way to mainstream fashion as well as the tween-directed (and adult) (mass-)market in toys.

The human skull is a potent symbol. This immortal icon of mortality is a much used theme in dark toys aimed at an adult audience. David Barringer, who writes about contemporary design, sees that art, such as the works of Damian Hirst, play a part in making the skull a much employed theme in visual culture almost an 'evergreen':

The skull is an elastic symbol, but it expresses a frustrated desire: we will never see our own skulls. The impossibility of this self-knowledge maddens and tempts us. So we flatten our skulls, misshape them, adorn and prettify them, wrap them in thorns and set them afire, make them scary, funny, silly, slick, put them everywhere, on everything, for whatever excuse comes to mind. On and on, we are doomed to representations, teasing ourselves with reminders of the limits of our perceptions. We will never see our own skulls. But we will always want to (Barringer, 45, 47–48).

The subcultural phenomenon of favoring dark themes is slowly spreading to the masses. What seems to have solely belonged to designer/art toys now is made available for a wider audience. At the same time, there seems to be a wider acceptance of the dark in a product group that has generally been associated with attributes such as cute, colourful, soft, nostalgic and retro.

A toy should support a child's balanced growth. It should not be too scary or contain other inappropriate elements (Kuluttajavirasto, 2009). Yet, popular culture is full of cinematic examples of dolls 'gone wrong' (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 31). Dark themes continue to thrive in contemporary doll design. One example are the Living Dead Dolls, designed by Ed Long and Damien Glonek and produced by Mezco Toys since year 2000 (www.mezcotoyz.com).



The visuality introduced by designer toys has spread into toys directed at a more mainstream audience. Ohiya characters photographed at the Licensing Show, Las Vegas, 2012.



Zombiezoo soft toys as presented by their designer Neecy Twinem at the International Toy Fair in New York, 2011.

Their doll version tributing the legend of Frozen Charlotte (launched in 2006) comes with a 'Death Certificate' with the following story line: "Fair Charlotte was a frozen corpse, And a word she no more spoke. Her flesh had become like fine china, And just as easily broke. The Death Certificate further states: 'Disobeying her mother's wishes, Charlotte literally skated on thin ice. Falling through the crack beneath her feet she paid the ultimate price. So next time you don't listen to your parents, think of the dreadful sight, Of poor little frozen Charlotte, rotting in the lonely cold winter's night."

How dark designs are perceived by their audience may somewhat surprisingly come to have an effect on how the toy designer is seen:

KH: Who is your target group? Do you sketch your target group?

Interviewee: - Myself. I only make stuff that I like and hope other people will like it. There is this element of painting that gave me something to bring to the table when interacting with people – I'm an urban artist. I'm proud of what I do. At the same time this alienates you, my designs can be loved and hated. I'm seen as morbid and twisted because of my design. An artist's personality is judged based on this, they make ridiculous generalizations. (TD/Is)

In the designer toys category, it is not uncommon for the designs to combine child-like and naïve expressions with a monstrous or disproportionate body. This may have an effect on how the designer responsible for the toy is perceived, as in the case of my interviewee who recognizes the possibility of being judged because of the outcome of artistic work. Fearful and vulnerable attributes create a controversy typical of post-modern expression. There are different degrees of darkness in designs of contemporary toys. For example, the fantastic toy characters such as the plush toys in the popular Uglydoll family are not in fact ugly despite their name. The softness and the colourful appearance of the creatures suggest an openness for touch and playful engagement (Walker, 2004). These are, in my thinking, dolls that play with the idea of ugliness without really representing anything parallel to, for example, grotesque.

Recent developments in contemporary and mass-produced toys are inspired by trends more general in popular culture. For example, vampires and werewolves have inspired the design of the doll line Monster High and soft toys named Vamplets. The popularity of the monstrous in the context of toys can perhaps be explained by referring to the idea of Walter Evans, who writes of monster movies: 'Our traditional monsters are our creations, but they are also us – these dark aspects of ourselves which we seek to deny and which, therefore, we must destroy...' (1992, 463).

In the category of soft toys baby vampires (*Vamplets*), zombie animals (*Zombie Zoo*) and a more recent arrival 'Roadkill animals' both flirt with and carnivalise life after death. This development is clearly inspired by popular literature and TV series of the first decennium of the 21st century, which has accentuated the living dead such as vampires. Vamplets pay homage to the color black, the gothic look and vampires. Artist G-Ra, responsible for the birth of the fleece vampire babies, reports being inspired by the works of Edward Gorey when designing Vamplets. A 'blood'-filled nursing bottle is a central accessory for the toy characters. Names such as 'Cadaverson Nightshade' and 'Count Vlad Von Gloom' represent two of the six vampire babies who, according to their designer, are 'nasty, but totally cute doing creepy things'. A line of 'Undead Pets' is set to be launched in the future.

Another example of dark toys with fantastic elements are the *Watchover VooDoo dolls*, talismans of today. The Watchover voodoo doll is a hand made voodoo doll, not designed as traditional voodoo dolls have in the past to harm, but to protect the owner. Imitation of earlier forms is present in both the Vamplets (paleness, sharp teeth) and the VooDoo dolls (small size, simple features). Yet there are new twists in the design of their appearances as the fantastic also seems to 'cutify' and soften the dark and monstrous elements by making the characters more compact and adding on vulnerable expressions through distinctive shapes of their eyes.

Creatures of the night usually associated with dark atmospheres or actions have in this case been re-designed into adorable and adoptable (and more acceptable) characters that allow a more human platform for attachment than their paragons. But what is monstrous re-invents itself all the time. As Jenkins writes '... any stable separation between the monstrous and the normal is breaking down. What provoked unimaginable horror a decade ago, might well be mundane and mainstream today' (Jenkins, 2007b, 50).¹⁵³ In many movies of the past the occurrence of possessed toys has spiced up the plot. A recent example stems from the *Toy Story* trilogy, as in its first movie the story revealed the toy enemy number one, the boy next door – vicious Sid – who makes evil experiments with toy characters such as creating demonic hybrids out of mutilated toys. The result, a view almost resembling one from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, captures the on going play behind closed doors: Toys surrender to the powers of the players and the control of the toy designers is lost. What happens after the toy is produced is up for the players to decide. Therefore, toys as open objects do not limit the players to engage with the object in one manner only, but in manifold ways of play, some even so terrifying that the designer may never have considered them possible.

Controversial uses of toys may also generate creative power: A workshop for Finnish youth in 2008 created much debate when plush animals were given new lives through unexpected visual looks by e.g. running with scissors and spilling blood red paint over them. The youth taking part in the workshop considered the exercise as stress relief and an empowering experience (Vuori, 2008).¹⁵⁴

The constant battle of good versus evil is another rich narrative resource for toy designers. War itself is a popular theme in children's play that does not limit itself to the availability or accessibility to war-related toys. Play with toy weapons or other toys that promote violence should be discouraged according to traditional views (Danette & Romano, 2003, 911). Smith says that the "war play dilemma" means that "war play" is discouraged by many adults and is banned in many kindergartens (Smith, 2010, 201).

Toys that afford war play are when seen from a wide perspective all kinds of toy weapons. After the war in Vietnam, war toys have moved to take their inspiration from fantasies related either space or human history (Römpötti, 2012, C1).

¹⁵³ For further examples, see www.myfurrybones.com and www.drkrinkles.com.

¹⁵⁴ Taboos in toys do not limit themselves to the monstrous, but include some mundane dimensions as well. The Swedish lifestyle shop chain Designorget advertised in 2010 the work of Emma Megitt from Gothenburg, who has designed soft toys *Kiss & Bajs [Pee and Poo]* with the slogan 'to make something huggable from a taboo'. These kinds of toys would perhaps have been considered 'monstrous' in their own way some decades ago, as referring back to the comment made by Jenkins, 2007b, 50.

Jones notes that Star Wars ‘brought fighting, blasting, killing, and the blowing up of big things back to children’s media’ (Jones, 2002, 43).

There are differences in how war toys are perceived in different parts of the world. In the category of action figures that somehow relate to the war theme, there are for example ‘Playmobil knights and barbarians, pirates and Roman legionaries, all wielding lethal weapons’. As the *Economist* writes in 2008, Europeans can even live with American military toys, if they are old enough (*Economist*, 2/2/2008).

Studies conducted in Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the U.S.A. all report that about 60-75% of boys and one-third of girls play with aggressive toys [i.e. toy guns or action figures] at home (*Understanding Aggressive Toys*, 2009). According to Hellendoorn & Harinck it is clear that girls do not often possess war toys themselves – only 20% does, against 80% of the boys (1999, 249). According to Karimäki’s study, young girls may still play a Hello Kitty war. She claims that we cannot remove war from children’s play. It should be tolerated as a part of other imaginative activities (Karimäki; Kuluttajavirasto 2009).

One cannot say that play-fighting is ‘bad’ play or that it is less valuable than other types of play, argues Goldstein. A sense of pretence is also needed. However, the line is sometimes vague, for example, when play-fighting turns into real fighting, which is usually because intentions have been misperceived (Goldstein in TIE Newsletter, 21st of November, 2011).

But playing with rage, as Jones notes, is a valuable way to reduce its power. ‘Being evil and destructive in imagination is a vital compensation for the wildness we all have to surrender on our way to being good people’ (Jones, 2002, 11). In fact, as Sutton-Smith writes, ‘... children who can handle playthings of an aggressive nature through imaginative play seem to be less given to actual violence than children whose imagination is not so active’ (*The Psychology of Toys and Play*, 5).

When a toy reflects too closely what goes on in the life of humans, it can be too much to handle, as one case in my toy player interviews shows:

My husband gave him [the toy character] a knife, but we keep it inside his pants because of the recent stabbing incidents [in the city where the toy owner lives]. (TP/ap)

One major difference between the toy cultures of adults and children is that the toys directed at adult audiences may express subversive ideas about what is appropriate to toy with. An interesting development among designer toys is the direction towards what is generally considered ‘sick’ and evil. These toys are, according to many sources, taking the dark aspect too far. Let us use some examples to demonstrate:



Contemporary interpretation of a ‘cutesy’ voodoo doll, as displayed in a shop window in New Orleans, 2011.

The following example tells tale of another uncanny toy type, this time of dolls that according to their original idea, imitate human beings as closely as possible: *Reborn dolls* that in most cases imitate real newborn babies have their grotesque variations. In mild cases the dolls have eyes in strange colours, such as turquoise, or hair in an abnormal shade of pale. In the fiercest cases the doll is given horns. In the light of the examples given here, the ‘uncanniness’ of the toy depends on where it falls on the axis between the simulation of the real and the fantastic (and the morbid).

Themes that seem to be a taboo in most mass-marketed toys of today are toy characters that deal with ‘bad taste’ as is the case with the example of hand-painted, collectable Bad Taste Bears which originated in 1999 in the United Kingdom. Another example is the “Crazy for You” bear that came with a straitjacket:

To the relief of advocates for the mentally ill, the Vermont Teddy Bear Co. said Thursday that its straitjacketed “Crazy for You” bears are sold out and that it will not make any more. For weeks, advocates and Republican Gov. James Douglas have criticized the toy as insensitive. The \$69.95 bear came with a straitjacket and commitment papers. The company said it had decided weeks ago that it would stop manufacturing the bears but would continue selling them through Valentine’s Day (U.S.A. Today, ‘Crazy’ bear off the market, 02/07/2005).

Takashi Murakami’s art projects suggest that it is possible for cute objects to look helpless and aggressive at the same time (Ngai, 2005). This tactic is demonstrated by two examples: In the first, toy designer Mori Chack tells the story behind *Gloomy Bear*. In the second, designer Joe Ledbetter continues about how the helpless is combined with aggression:

If anyone really ran into a bear, they would be terrified, right. If a real bear wandered into town, it would probably be shot. But in stuffed animal form, bears somehow become cute and cuddly. The same bear that we usually fear and kill. I convey the humor in this contradiction. There is also the unfortunate fact that animals age faster than humans. When the boy Pity found Gloomy, he was still a baby bear. Another message I want to convey that abusing animals is just as bad as abusing children who are unable to defend themselves (Budnitz, 2006, 353).

What I hope is that people find humor and craftsmanship in my work, and that I have captured a delicious moment. I really like to lure the viewer with cuteness and then smack them over the head with something sinister, subversive, too just painfully true. Much like being the loving owner of a rabid dog (Joe Ledbetter interviewed by Budnitz, 2006, 364).

There are cultural differences in how different nationalities respond to the contemporary toy stories that come in the form of a toy: Kelts says that Japanese stories need not have happy ending. “Disney is always pushing the good side, the morally right. But the in-between world speaks to the Japanese” (2007, 46). Recent developments, as demonstrated above, show that perhaps we in western societies are changing our views, little by little. If contemporary toy design and the play patterns in relations to toys are to be believed, we are embracing our dark sides in the name of play in more perceivable ways than before. But the connection to the uncanny valley may be unintentional as well. The case of the Mermaid Princess doll caused a minor scandal in Sweden in autumn 2011, when the ‘unhealthily thin’ doll was withdrawn from the market due to its ‘sickly’ bodily representation (Sahl, 2011, 26). What is interesting here is that anything goes in terms of toy design, especially in the realm of designer toys. Ultimately, it is the market that decides whether or not these toys will be allowed to continue their lives in the market place, or receive a death sentence.





Fear Hunters, 2013

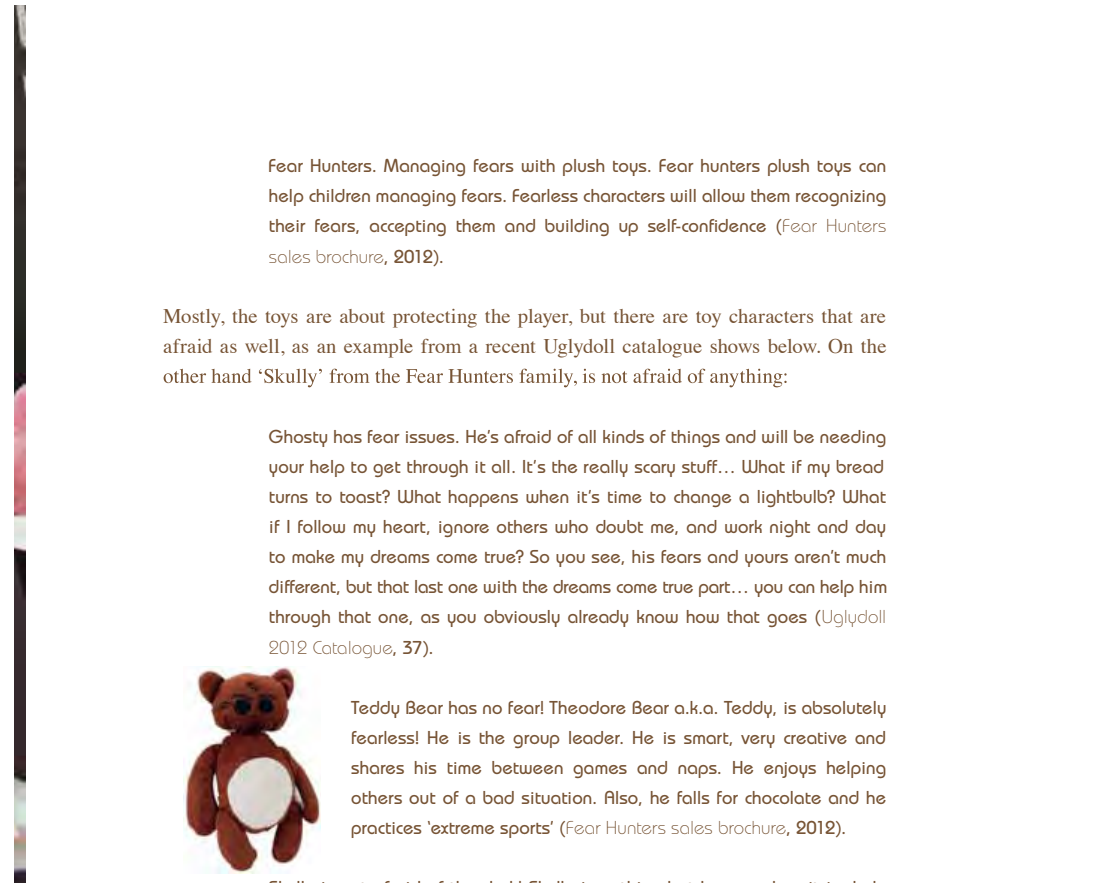
Fighting back fear

Deaddy Bears – you bring them to life.¹⁵⁵

Walsh writes of the traditional teddybear as a ‘plaything and protector’ (2005, 15). Today, back stories of toys may communicate characteristics that help the player identify with the ‘personality’ of the toy. Fears are a central theme in many soft toy characters. The back stories of the MyBeastFriend characters are according to their website ‘about bullies, fear of the dark and the water, as well as being optimistic and a good listener’.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ See www.deaddybears.com

¹⁵⁶ See www.mybeastfriends.com.



Fear Hunters. Managing fears with plush toys. Fear hunters plush toys can help children managing fears. Fearless characters will allow them recognizing their fears, accepting them and building up self-confidence (Fear Hunters sales brochure, 2012).

Mostly, the toys are about protecting the player, but there are toy characters that are afraid as well, as an example from a recent Uglydoll catalogue shows below. On the other hand ‘Skully’ from the Fear Hunters family, is not afraid of anything:

Ghosty has fear issues. He’s afraid of all kinds of things and will be needing your help to get through it all. It’s the really scary stuff... What if my bread turns to toast? What happens when it’s time to change a lightbulb? What if I follow my heart, ignore others who doubt me, and work night and day to make my dreams come true? So you see, his fears and yours aren’t much different, but that last one with the dreams come true part... you can help him through that one, as you obviously already know how that goes (Uglydoll 2012 Catalogue, 37).



Teddy Bear has no fear! Theodore Bear a.k.a. Teddy, is absolutely fearless! He is the group leader. He is smart, very creative and shares his time between games and naps. He enjoys helping others out of a bad situation. Also, he falls for chocolate and he practices ‘extreme sports’ (Fear Hunters sales brochure, 2012).

Skully is not afraid of the dark! Skully is nothing but happy when it is dark. And in his presence, creepy creatures keep very quiet. He is the goofie one. He makes many mistakes and has a bad habit of provoking blunders. He loves jokes and cracking a snack, for he surely is an unforgivable glutton (Fear Hunters sales brochure, 2012).



Doppelgänger series, 2011

Toys as avatars

In the post-modern world, claims Retter, 'toys must be either exciting and thrilling or give pride to the owner to possess a status symbol which is presentable in the peer group' (1999, 36). Wachtel writes: 'Whether it be games, dolls, action figures, vehicles or video games – toys help children and adults be what they always cannot be in real life, or to "pretend."' Toys teach us to be ourselves and they unlock our own special ways of uniqueness' (Wachtel, 2010, 9). In the contemporary world, toys not only function as status symbols, as Retter writes on the threshold of the new century. Sutton-Smith suggests that we should think of some toys primarily as identifiers (1986, 208). It is precisely in this way that the toys of today offer themselves, not only as possessions but as places of identification: Toys have become vehicles that transport us to new worlds, into worlds where we cannot necessarily be present as our bodily selves. In other words, toys are offering us platforms on which we may build our second selves. They are our *avatars*.

In the 1980s a toy phenomenon took the world by storm as the Cabbage Patch Kids were launched. 'They offer tactile involvement and security, a [Cabbage Patch] Kid is totally identified with or adopted as an extension of the child's integral being', writes Berg (1986, 209). This toy-type utilized the activity of adoption in ways never seen before in toy marketing. On the other hand, the 'Kids' in their personalized, yet mass-marketed looks afforded the possibility for their owner and player to identify with the doll. I know for certain that the doll my father chose for me had an idea behind it: Sofi, as she was named, would be a 'mini-me' for me. Toying with identity begins already in childhood:

Yes, Batman was [my favourite toy] Toys are very important to me too, especially adult toys, sort of in parallel with children's toys. It was the whole identity thing, how it forms or is formulated through toys when you are a child. And now the customization phenomenon, next to it, what it tells about humans today when everything has to be exactly how they want it to be, in terms of things. What that tells about the human today is extremely good a web when you go deeper into it. (AT/mk)

The idea of the toy as an avatar has since been developed much further from what it was in the time when the Cabbage Patch Dolls were launched. In the context of the final part of this chapter, I will explore in more detail how a toy character may become an avatar for its (adult) player.

An avatar has been defined by Wilson (2003) as ‘a surrogate self for the subject’. Identity work can take place wherever you create an avatar (Turkle, 2011, 180). Traditionally, avatars have been connected with digital games and virtual worlds: ‘An avatar is any digital representation (graphical or textual), beyond a simple label or name, that has agency (an ability to perform actions) and is controlled by a human agent in real time. Avatars function like user-controlled puppets. Users command the actions of the avatar, but it is the avatar itself which performs the action’ (Bell, 2008, 2). In the context of this thesis, I would like to propose that toys have avatarial potential as well, and thus afford the possibility to create ‘a mini-me’ out of a doll, action figure or soft toy. As we have seen, toys may be created with celebrity personalities in mind, but toy portraits may equally well be requested of everyday people with no celebrity status whatsoever.

KH: What was the most challenging character that you have worked on?

Interviewee: Timewise it probably was this Elvis, because it’s so much bigger [than My Little Pony figures in general]. It’s still there. Or then it’s this Gene Simmons, the customer was really specific about which costume it should have. They are really unbelievable creations, so they took a long time. But then there are some who want one [portrait] of for example their daughter, so they are kind of everyday people, they don’t have that kind of a media personality that would be created for them, so if you don’t know this person, it’s quite challenging to capture it... (TA/mk)

In December 2010, I became obsessed with the idea of acquiring another Blythe doll. After having had good luck in 2009 while visiting Tokyo and finding Sunshine Holiday – the doll that I later on decided to name Kiki – she, who came with a tan and holiday gear, I desperately wanted a Blythe that would correspond with an idea in my head about a perfect “me”. In a Japanese online toyshop that I found through eBay whilst being in Japan at a design conference, I found Sunday’s Very Best. A Blythe doll with long blonde hair complete with bangs, a beautiful blue-toned outfit with accessories to match. Through a complicated procedure, I managed to purchase the doll online and the wait started. I arrived back home in Finland after Independence Day. About two weeks later I was able to pick up my second Blythe in the local post office. Lola arrived safe and sound.

An adult may view his/her doll as a portal to a world of possibilities (Tomshine, 2010, 334–339). One of these possibilities is to use the doll as an extension of oneself, an instrument for projecting one’s own characteristics into the toy, not unlike how avatars are created and used in various digital games such as *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims* or *Second Life*.

KH: What makes a toy an experience to the player?

Interviewee: It’s such an easy tool. In a way I played in two different ways when I was a child. There was this Batman character, which represented directly the Batman [from media]. When one admired this character so much, and when I had the Batman doll you had it [the character] for yourself. But when you had a Barbie, it kind of always represented yourself. That it was brave and it had beautiful long hair and these things that you wish you had yourself. So you kind of always played with yourself. (TA/mk)

With the help of the doll, the playing adult can imagine him/herself in costumes, situations and states of mind that are more easily realized through the toy. The doll can thus function as a stand-in for the self, a *doppelganger* or a *body double*. Ultimately, as the excerpt from one of my interviews shows, with a toy, you may play ‘with yourself’. In the doll the human makes a small description of herself and provides it with properties she wishes to have herself or ones that she despises (Lönqvist, 1992, 243). To give yet another example, the action figures of Star Wars provided a generation with some of their earliest avatars, encouraging them to assume the role of a Jedi Knight or an intergalactic bounty hunter, enabling them to physically manipulate the characters to construct their own stories (Jenkins, 2006, 150).

When a girl plays with a baby doll, she becomes in her fantasy the doll’s mother. She talks directly to the doll, entering into the play as an actor in her own right. When playing with a Barbie doll, on the other hand, the girl usually “becomes” Barbie (Ferris Motz, 1992, 219).

Being ponies, rather than baby dolls to be taken care of, these toys allow for a certain kind of freedom: fantasies of galloping, flying, swimming. They are not, however, for riding. Play involves being a pony yourself, not owning a pet as a pet (Seiter, 1995, 156).

KH: How do you feel about making a toy [portrait – a My Little Pony] of a person?

Interviewee: I think it’s so right for us. [Laughter]

KH: Can you clarify, a bit?

Interviewee: Well, the one’s that have ordered [these toy portraits] from me have been loving mothers or boyfriends and of course they want to express how important this person is or else. So it’s a beautiful thought and they might not think further than that. But these are portraits as well. (TA/mk)

The *Blythe* doll, a popular toy with adult players, is played with as a fashion icon, as the doll lends itself well to be dressed, styled and hair-played with. On the other hand, evidence for the Blythe dolls also being used as toy versions of oneself, as a ‘mini-me’, can be found in discussions carried out on fan forums (see i.e. Blythe Forum Europe), in which the reasons to acquire and play with Blythe can be seen to partly depend on the idea of the doll as a doppelganger. Confessions range from comments such as ‘I bought her to customise so she’d be my mini-me’ to seeing similarities in skin tone and hair colour between the doll and its owner. Also, as one fan expressed herself: ‘maybe that’s why i [sic] love my dollies so much, i [sic] think they look so much like me’ (ibid.).¹⁵⁷ Avatarial play does not limit itself to Barbie, My Little Pony or even the Blythe doll. It is very much present as a form of play in more recent toy characters, such as the Uglydolls:

What is it about Uglydolls? They’re soft, they’re plush, they’re cute, they’re openly called by a name that is usually anathema to boys: dolls. Teacher Scott Cunningham says: “And if you want to see an avatar, this is it,” he said. “The kids are their speaking through them.” (McNeil, 2008).

KH: If you would make a self-portrait of a yourself as [My Little] pony, would you see it as problematic to make a toy out of yourself?

Interviewee: No, not really. What really only is required is a little self-irony. It would inexorably become an alter ego in some way. (TA/mk)

A toy artist, may make a toy portrait out of any person, even herself, as the excerpt from one of my interviews shows. In an e-mail that was dropped in my inbox on the 24th of February 2012 the doll company Paradise Galleries announced a competition, where the most beautiful baby would be awarded a baby doll in her likeness. Making a doll out of yourself seems to be a trend both on the player and now even on the manufacturing side. The resemblance to a toy character does not limit itself to similar looks between the toy and the owner but extends to refer to emotional aspects of their personalities:

I probably want to offer it [the beaten up soft toy, a seal] a little security and it’s easy to identify with when one is feeling beaten up by the world. (TP/ps)

¹⁵⁷ I have explored Blythe dolls as a means of identity construction, a case of ‘double-representation’ and avatarial toy play in separate articles, see e.g. Heljakka (2011).



Jack - A Monster Factory toy one may relate to - or not, 2013.

Shopping for a toy character may thus become a chase for ‘finding one just like your boyfriend, your best friend, your mother, or even yourself’, as described in the Monster Factory catalogue.¹⁵⁸

Identification with a character provides ‘a sense of intimacy and emotional connection with a character’, says Cohen (2006, 184). Blurring the lines between self and the other, the identification that Hills refers to as ‘fan impersonation’, challenges cultural norms of the self as a fixed and bounded entity (2002, 171). For example, the Japanese love characters so much that not only do they want to play with them, but also, become them (Kelts, 2007, 148). Cosplay is another Japanese phenomenon well adopted by many other countries.

Cosplay (an abbreviation for *costume play*) relates to the now global phenomenon of manga and anime, and refers to dressing up and playing your favourite character from popular culture. The activity does not limit itself to the dress – in cosplay the players try to get closer to the character with behaviour and mimicry. Cosplay gives the player an opportunity to toy with a character, even to become a ‘toy’ herself. Elena Dorfman, who has photographed cosplayers sees them “making icons out of their icons” (Rauch & Bolton, 2010, 176).

¹⁵⁸ See Monster Factory catalogue 2013.

In my own artistic work I have made tributes to both Catwoman and on the other hand to Lewis Carroll by dressing up as *Alice in Wonderland* for a project carried out in the U.S.A. While these can be seen as special occasions in the name of artistic cosplay (cosplayers only dress up for occasions such as conventions), lolitas carry outfits regularly. Being a lolita means dressing up in doll-like outfits, complete with hair and make-up. There are subcultural styles ranging from classic to provocative. 'There are lolitas who are in their 30s and 40s, so it is not a teenage thing', as one of the lolitas in a magazine article mentions (Nessi, 2012, 19–24).

One of the functions of stories and games is to help children rehearse for what they'll be in later life. Anthropologists and psychologists who study play, however, have shown that there are many other functions as well – one of which is to enable children to pretend to be just what they know they'll never be (Jones, 2002, 11).

A toy avatar may thus afford us the possibility of the 'me' that is never attainable. Freud argued that play can be a kind of ritualized wishing, notes Kline. 'Play, like all fantasy, shifts attention from here and now on the less restrictive plane of the possible' (1993, 331). As my research material shows, toys may also come to represent avatars of our family members, even significant others.

I got it [the toy character] as a gift from my Godmother. We bought the other [toy] members of his family later by ourselves. [...] I christened him after my father. (TP/ap)

The toys my boyfriend gave me [...] represent me and my boyfriend. These toys have helped me to retain the spirit of the fun we had together. They are like embodiment of people. [...] It looks like the toys resemble us physically. (TP/le)

As the arguments made here demonstrate, toys afford the possibility for us to see ourselves in the toy – a plaything to be played with by giving it the personality, charm or some other kind of characteristic that we could never have in our present life.


'The dolls have become children for her' [Tomshine writes in his story about a doll player.] 'She names them, buys things for them, and changes their clothes as they change their stories...' (Tomshine, 2010, *Aeryn's Dolls*, comic story).



Tribute to Catwoman at my *This is Play* exhibition, 2011.

Where we keep these 'mini-me's' is not all the same, either. As one doll house enthusiast says about her creation in an interview: "On the closet there is Villa M [doll house]. There lives the alter ego of [the owner] S." (Sevänen, 2010). "V. [the doll house] is filled with stories and points of convergence with reality. In V. there is a second-hand shop like E has, and a sewing room, that P has" (Walemies, 2011, 36). The two quotes show that the player clearly identifies with the 'inhabitant' of the doll house. The doll house, then, comes in many cases to represent something similar in the player's current life situation and material environment. This being said, we arrive at an understanding that the avatars of the toy extends to its environment. Moreover, by acquiring accessories for it and even a 'place of its own', we may also supply our toy as our avatar, a lifestyle that would not be possible for our human selves. Here is where the boundary between dolls and doll houses, the miniatures and actual playthings and the equivalent play environments and accessories for action figures and soft toys blur:

A leather sofa would be an expensive acquisition, but I have been able to buy that for the teddies (Walemies, 2011, 36).

A blurry photograph of a forest floor with a semi-transparent text box overlaid. The background shows a dense forest of tall, thin trees, likely pines, with a ground covered in fallen pine needles and some green moss. The text box is a light beige color with a thin white border.

I have had Little-A now for some 20 years. Me and my mom [...] have joint custody of him, because Little-A has a family of his own. My parents are called X and Y, and I have a brother named Z, so Little-A's family has members with the same names. But unfortunately, when I moved out from my parents home in the countryside, Little-A divorced [from his doll family], and left Little-X, Little-Y and Little-Z there. Now Little-A has a new wife here in the [city] who is more fashionable, T. T has a suede jacket and jewellery. My mom doesn't like T, so she stays [in the city] when we visit home with Little-A. (TP/ap)

In the woods, 2012





Dream, 2012

GLOW:

TOY PLAYER PROFILES AND PRACTICES

The wow is not a toy, it's what you can do with it.
- Dr. Toy



Chapter 10: Adult toy player profiles in the realms of art, design and productive play

Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.

- Friedrich Schiller (*Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man*, Letter 15, 1794)

For it is in the spontaneous play of his faculties that man finds himself and his happiness.

- Santayana (*The Sense of Beauty*, 2010, 21).

One of the classical play theorists, namely Jean Piaget, does not see adult audiences as potential doll players. Instead, he argues that games with rules are almost the only forms of play that persist at the adult stage (1958, 148). My consideration of adult toy play based on an evaluation of the theories of play, popular readings and interview materials suggest that adults indeed are potential, if not the original doll players. The notion of Fox and Landshoff supports this thinking, as they point out that ‘the emphasis on the doll as a child’s plaything is both misleading and confusing to collectors, curators, dealers, and everyone I consulted’ (Fox & Landshoff, 1973, 55). The toy, and the character toy in particular, then, is not just an object for passing the time but also a companion, a bearer of meanings, an instrument of knowledge, and as such, not an end in itself and not just for use by children.

Before delving into an analysis of the adult toy players themselves in the name of adult toy player profiles in the realms of art, design and creative and productive play, it is high time to bring forward the question of hobbying in reference to toys. This is best done by giving an example of how a toy player usually addresses his/her behaviour with playthings:

When I was a child my parents could not afford to buy everything that I wanted [...] As I now go to work myself and can afford to buy things, I put money into for example flea market toys. For me, this [toy collecting] hobby comes with a larger appreciation of the popular culture of the 70s and 80s. All movies, music, video games and comics are important (T.T. in Friman, 2009, 22).

Another example illustrates the attitudes towards adults ‘toying’:

Susanna has had to experience that not everyone sees toy hobbying as something a normal adult would do... there are people who do think that collecting Playmobil characters and Barbies is an activity of crazy people (Virtanen 2012, 62).

It seems ‘safer’ for an adult to admit to hobbying, or even better, ‘hobbying with toys’ than admitting to actual play with toys. In Finland, 62 minutes per day are dedicated to hobbies. It is twice the amount compared to the beginning of the new millennium. This has to do with the use of computers, which 42% of Finns use for hobbying. The amount has almost quadrupled from the beginning of the 21st century. Simultaneously, the percentage of Finns devoting their time for handicrafts has been cut in half compared to the 1980s. Only 4% of all Finnish people belong to this group. In sum, as seen from the Finnish perspective, hobbying is on the rise and nothing to be ashamed of in general. Hobbying that happens with toys, on the other hand, is something that feels a little suspicious for the players and there really is no need to discuss toys apart from the people hobbying with them. The ‘stigma’ of the adult toy player may become too heavy a burden for someone who just likes to ‘hobby’ with their toys. Somehow, I do not see calling this activity a hobby doing justice to the ludic engagement that happens with toys at adult age. Actually, I am reluctant to use the term of hobbying at all, because the term itself is a vague one, suggesting a bunch of woolly and thus unclear activities partaken at leisure time. At the same time, I have sympathy for the toy players that have not yet come out of their toy closets and admitted that what they do with their toys, is in fact play, nothing else.

In the introductory part of this chapter I will make an attempt to strengthen the argument about the nature of adult toy play as more than a *hobby*. Let me start by going back to meaning of the word ‘play’. As in the words of Henricks, to “play with” an object is to experience the satisfactions trying to control it (2006, 186). To play with something is to manipulate it in various ways. To play with a toy is to explore an artefact, as we have theorized in the previous chapters of this thesis.

Players, says Rinker, are the individuals who enjoy playing with their toys. ‘They are careful, but do not go to extremes. Their toys have a well-handled, well-loved worn look about them’ (Rinker, 1991, 6). To toy with something, is according to the Oxford English Dictionary ‘to play with (a material object), to handle or finger idly; hence, to work idly or carelessly with or at’ (Oxford English Dictionary).

'...what are the mature doing when they play?' asks Brian Sutton-Smith in his book *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997, 47). The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the findings of adult activities in the company of toys – and other players. Given the increased visibility of toys in multiple areas of culture, it is reasonable to question what the everyday practices are that have become established and associated with being an adult toy player. How then, does an adult 'toy' – or play with a toy?

The ultimate paradox in exploring the concept of play may be that play can only be understood through itself (Burghardt, 2005, 405). Consequently, in order to understand what play is in a more thorough manner, I have examined people through their play behaviour. More accurately, I have examined the playful exploration that goes on when adults engage with toys. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, we have seen that the toy play of adults has not been addressed as the multidimensional form of behaviour it actually is, at least not in academic research. What is thus the main point of this thesis, is to unveil this phenomenon by looking at it from as many angles as possible. The time has come to look what adult players, through their relations, behaviour and productive activities, do with toys. In other words, as will be explained in the following, we will lastly arrive at how adults are 'toying' and in that sense come to an understanding of the principles of adult play in contemporary toy cultures.

As we have seen in the course of this thesis, play with toys is traditionally not discussed from the viewpoint of productivity. Lönnqvist thinks that children's culture has not been noted as a form of culture that enables creative formulation (1991, 18). This has had a probable affect on toy culture as well, since toys are not (apart from a few categories – e.g. construction, and specific toys such as Lego) been addressed as playthings that enable creative outcomes. Character toys as the main area of study in this thesis, have traditionally not been viewed as playthings that allow creative manipulation apart from being used as props in imaginary role-play. In other words, toys of this type – dolls, soft toys and action figures, are, at least in traditional analyses of play, used to play out different roles in 'plotted' play. I do not mean to depreciate role-playing with toys, which in fact is an important form of adult toy play as well. As shown in Chapter 9, toys enable their player to toy with themselves in a way. This means that different roles are taken, some more bound to be similar to our actual selves, some leaning more on our fantastic, imaginary selves.

The 'outcome' of adult role-play with toys may result in outcomes such as learning about ourselves, our peers and our understanding of the world. Seen in this way, there is no reason to dismiss the value of role-playing as one dimension of adult toy play. However, as the profiles elaborated in the following will show, an emphasis is laid on processes of transformation that occur as a result of playing with toys. As we will see, a lot of these do happen by physical manipulation of the toy.

As Henricks explains: 'Individuals play not as an act of control but as a testing or teasing of the environment. Players try to provoke reactions from the objects of their orientation. ...The fascination of play comes from our inability to predict just how the objects will react or what responses we ourselves will need to make to address their reactions' (Henricks, 2011, 40).

Hakkarainen agrees, as he sees that play may also be viewed as a process of "testing" different subjects (1991, 30). As we have explored in the thesis, the toy as an artefact is tested in various ways in order to find out what its affordances are. In theories of play, toy play is referred to as object play. According to Smith, object play enhances innovative problem-solving, and creativity (2010, 138).

In many writings, the developmental values of toy play are stressed: According to many views, for example in the view of 'Dr.Toy', toys should help children develop a wide variety of skills (Auerbach, 2009, 20).

I think there is sensitive play, there is cognitive play, there is creative play.
(TD/r)

However, American pedagogue Diane Levin argues, that the contemporary culture of play does not encourage creativity. Children who are given enough free, unstructured time, are creative and innovative. According to Levin, the toys of today follow the state of culture by not providing encouragement to creativity (Levin in Kauhanen 2004). This critical stance towards toys is a common rhetoric that tends to live on in much cited works of the researchers that have expressed ideas about toy culture:

Clearly, modern character toys are not designed to enhance children's creativity and meet their emotional needs; rather, they are fashioned around carefully researched and positioned play niches – cosy defenders of feelings, omnipotent heroes and glamorous superstars – symbolic representations of characters which children like to manipulate in their play (Kline, 1993, 328-329).

Sutton-Smith believes, however, that the child players do control the toys rather than the other way around. This is what we have been referring to when discussing toys as *agency*. As Sutton-Smith notes, toys are agencies for the players. 'They are controlled rather than controlling' (1986, 205). Therefore, it is possible to see creative play happen with character toys as well, as Kline admits (1993, 337).

In practice, this in the thinking of Kline means, that a player may for example 'dramatize elaborate stories, to break rules, to learn new attitudes and skills. These are the kind of activities which lead psychologists to put great faith in play', he says (Kline, 1993, 337). In terms of childhood development, play is seen as, a part of the process of developing and maturing, writes Panton. He notes the possibility of adult play, but sees it as regressive behaviour which 'no longer about learning, just a purely escapist pastime' (Panton, 2006, 200). It is not hard to see the dismissive attitude behind this idea, which sees adult play to limit itself to something that is a waste of time because of its escapist nature.

Walter Benjamin has written that we must not forget that the most enduring modifications in toys are never the work of adults, whether they are educators, manufacturers, or writers, but the result of children at play (Benjamin, 2005c, 101). But as the many examples in this thesis illustrate, toys cannot be limited to childhood and children's play. Nor can they seem to be played with solely according to the play scenarios designed into the toys by the toy designers and toy companies.

Design will always be interpreted, says Vihma (1998, 9). So will toys. In a way, a toy may be seen as an artefact which, due to its non-utilitarian quality, needs to be interpreted and de-coded by the player, in order for its potential to become released in play. Storey raises Hans-Georg Gadamer's argument of cultural texts and meaning making (2003, 41). According to Gadamer, the understanding of a cultural text is dependent on the perspective of the person who understands it. Therefore, meaning is something that depends on the person reading a text. Seen in this light, the play value of a toy is also dependent on the player's capability to put the toy 'into play'.

According Hekkert and Schifferstein, product experience depends on how an individual interacts with the product (2007, 4). A toy experience is therefore a result of how players engage with toys.

Without observing natural behaviour, it is difficult to gain a holistic picture of how people experience things, reminds Crossley (2003, 40). In my understanding, toy play explored from the perspectives of art, design and social play is all about interaction and engagement with the category of playful artefacts i.e. that is toys. Interaction, again, from the design viewpoint, should be observed through the lens of 'social ergonomics' and 'cultural ergonomics'. In the end, we need to develop a deep understanding of the aesthetics of interaction rather than the ergonomics of use, Dorst argues (2006, 29). Although traditional ergonomics (how the materiality of the toy as a modelled object lends itself to play) is an interesting question in reference to toys, it becomes more intriguing to pay attention to the dimension of interaction, as suggested by Dorst.

'The Geography of Play', as introduced by Maaik Lauwaert in her book *The Place of Play. Toys and Digital Cultures* (2009), refers to the idea that what is designed 'into' a toy may differ radically from the actual play practices partaken in the company of the toy. 'When players deviate from design and/or discourse, facilitated play practices come peripheral or divergent', she writes (Lauwaert, 2009, 17). In terms of adult toy play, it then, becomes interesting again to look at the possible divergent uses of toys that are seen, in the context of this thesis, from the viewpoint of ludic engagement with the toy.

'If we cannot consign play to the realm of childhood, what we need perhaps to do is to redefine ludus, or at least the ludic', writes Echeruo (1994, 146). Although this study needs to employ theories about play that specifically concern children, or seem to do so at least on a rhetorical level, what is of primary interest is to redefining the ludic as pointed out by Echeruo. At the same time, the goal is to formulate an understanding of adult toy play as a creative activity that may have productive outcomes. Following this thought, if we so choose, it is possible to see the potential utilitarian (or ecological) value of toy play at adult age in its potential to enhance and set in motion creative and productive behaviours.

'The interplay between children and toys remains complex, hard to follow and predict', says Ruckenstein (2008, 87). The remainder of this thesis seeks possible answers for whether the same goes for adult toy players. Surely individuals continue to manipulate toys in a great variety of ways just like they did in their childhood. Leaning on this idea, would on the other hand, not help myself to advance the argument of the growing interest that adults of today show towards contemporary toys.

It goes without saying that the attempt to profile adult toy players in the realms of art, design and creative play as complex entities in themselves, does not run its course in the context of this thesis. However, and perhaps more interestingly at this stage, the practices of adult players in contemporary toy cultures as clarified in the following, will give an initial voice to the players by showcasing the activities that are most perceivable by looking at the playgrounds of culture as they manifest themselves today.

'Toys do not determine the story, fantasy or script behind children's playing. Children will always manage to develop their own scenarios with any toy', writes Goldstein (TIE Newsletter, 25th of November, 2011). What about adults?

It is at this point that the interest turns to the profiling of adult toy players, which I have divided into areas of art, design and creative, productive play. My goal in the parts of this chapter is to present an interpretation of different types of adult players that engage with toys in various creative and productive ways.



Multiple Skeletor figurines as presented by a toy player at Adult Toy Day, 2009.

In actuality, this division allows a closer inspection of the activities in their respective contexts. However, by categorizing toy play in this way I do not want to claim that one profiled player could not 'toy' in several realms. A designer may be an artist and the other way around. A creative and social player may have aspirations of becoming an artist through the toy-related activities and so on. All toy players can be seen to socialize through their play in one way or another – either with their toy companion or fellow toy players. The nature of works of art is communicative and toys in themselves can be seen as a vehicle of communication, as has been illustrated earlier. Further, an adult who likes to surround him/herself with toys can be referred to as a 'collector'. However, my tactic in creating the four different profiles allows me to look at activities that the players most tend to carry out with toys. As stated earlier, this does not mean that the players would not or could not engage in activities connected with another player profiles. The toy play experience is manifested in several ways. In the following, I have attempted to shed light on the adult toy player profiles that engage in ludic activities in the playgrounds of the areas of toy cultures, as specified earlier.

Toy collectors

He who owns the biggest pile when he dies wins.
(Rinker, 1991, x)

Some people return to toys in adulthood under the guise of collecting.
(Of Toys and Men, exhibition press materials.)

Collecting, which is a toy type, an adult version of toy play. (TD/sp)

In terms of toy play, the activity seems most often to be referred to as a hobby related to collecting. As Stewart has written, the collection is a form of art as play, a form of involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and their manipulation of context (Danet and Tamar, 1994, orig. in Stewart, 1984). Geraghty suggests that both the production and collection of toys in the late 20th and early 21st centuries could be seen as a new form of cultural capital (1996, 210).

KH: Going back to adults and their use of toy objects, what do you think about collecting toys, is that also play?

Dt: Oh absolutely. Toys are a big collecting hobby. Doll collecting, toy collecting, trains. Many adults enjoy that as a hobby. They treasure that, it's really important for them to go to doll shows and train shows...

Where does the history of collecting begin? Collecting toys is by no means a recent fashion. Gröber has suggested that the habit began towards the end of the Middle Ages when craftsmen who had formerly earned their living making objects for the use of churches, falling on lean times, had to turn their hands to making smaller things for private patrons (Daiken, 1963, 195). As early as the 16th century it was in fashion for wealthy Europeans to have closets with toy collections (Nelson & Nilsson, 2005, 13). Contemporary popular culture, again, recognizes e.g. 'Al, the rapacious toy collector' from the Toy Story movie. The plot unfolds around the idea that the toy character cowboy Woody is being bought by a shameless collector who does not want to play with the toy, but put to a shelf. This communicates to the toy friends of Woody the idea similar to what death represents to us humans. After all, toys are meant to be played with, not only adored from a distance like most works of art. Perhaps, then, there is reason to explore further why there is a whole subchapter of the thesis is devoted to collecting in a thesis that deals with dimensions of adult toy play.

According to Blom (2004, 16) until the 16th century, collecting had been the prerogative of princes, whose interest concentrated on objects that were both beautiful and precious, thus reinforcing their wealth and power. The expansion of knowledge in the sixteenth century necessitated new approaches to new phenomenon (2004, 20–23). Collecting became popular among people who had neither great means nor great scholarly ambitions; ordinary people who had a little bit to spare. The work of Blom states that (2004, 24) in Amsterdam alone, just under 100 private cabinets of curiosities were recorded between 1600 and 1740. Blom sees collecting as a philosophical project, as an attempt to make sense of the multiplicity and chaos of the world. As such it has also survived to our day. Contest is a feature of play frequently discussed in literature (e.g. Caillois 1961; Huizinga, 1955). It is for example, present in the competition among collectors for the best items at flea markets.

Old toys are still collected from auctions, antique markets and flea markets (Niinikoski, 2011). The vast majority of toy collectors only desire only commercially manufactured toys (Hertz, 1969, 18). As my research material shows, mass-marketed toys – even the ones of a contemporary type – are collected. These are found in flea markets but also on online auctions and webshops such as eBay. Moreover, originally mass-produced, then artistically customized toys are sold in their own outlets such as websites and fan forums. Some toys have more value in certain circles, and designer toys as an example of artefacts in contemporary toy culture certainly fit this definition.

To this day, most literature on toy collecting speaks about ‘old toys’. This, in many cases means historical toys that have been produced decades ago. Nevertheless, the joys of hunting for, and accumulating toys may be similar when comparing the search for both ‘old’ and the newest kind of toys. The same goes when comparing the handling of the playthings. In the end of the 1960s, Louis Hertz wrote in his book *The Toy Collector*:

One of the most exciting and unusually rewarding hobbies – and one which has gained dramatically in popularity in recent years – is the purposeful collecting of old toys. Seeking out and preserving the playthings of an earlier but by no means necessarily long-past day has surfaced suddenly to become the great enthusiasm of an encountered but continually multiplying number of grown men and women. It is an avocation that provides all the pleasures and satisfactions of the most established collecting hobbies: the thrills of the search; the exhilaration of a new and perhaps rare find; the joys of acquisition, possession, and display; the more staid but, to some, even more rewarding pastime of analysis and research. Yet toy collecting offers much more than is unique to this particular vital and exciting hobby (Hertz, 1969, 7).

One has only to watch a collector handle objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired. (Walter Benjamin in Illuminations, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1968, 60–61. cited in Fox and Landshoff, 1973).

One reason for collecting old toys may be that they are considered as symbols of the Industrial Age. The mainstream of toy collecting derived from model railroading, which began to attract substantial attention as a serious adult hobby in the early 1930s (Hertz, 1969, 27, 29). In America, adult collectors now account for an estimated three quarters of sales of toy trains (Clark, 2007, 135).

Old toys seem to carry special meaning in them - they are adopted by new players at toy swaps and conventions all around the world. In the adult world, toys are respected and well-kept, often, in Blom’s terms (2004), away from the ‘messy paws of children’. In many ways, especially soft toys and toy characters become personalities, inanimate pets and quiet confidants who have their place on our shelves, sofas and even - hearts.

Still another reason for collecting old toys as observed by Hertz in the late 1960s, is their significant decorative value. ‘Just as most men are fascinated by the fine points of the toys’ technical design and construction, so too many women are captivated by the toys’ external appearance’, he says. As a result, old toys have become favorites in household decorative schemes (Hertz, 1969, 15, 18).

‘Today [written in 1928] old toys are important from a number of viewpoints. Folklore, psychoanalysts, art history, and the new education all find it a rewarding subject’ (Benjamin, 2005c, 100). But toy collecting represents much more than an interest towards historical artefacts.

According to Lehto, the history of the toy is also a history of adult collecting (1996, 6). Doll collecting is distinctly an adult pastime. ‘Women collect dolls for beauty, for associations, and for the memories they invoke of dolls they had in their own childhood’ St. George wrote in 1948 (1).’ Although dolls have originally been made for girls in mind, they are collected by adults who can afford these toys’ (Avomaa, 2012, 32).

KH: Have you had an interest towards toys before this [art project]?

Interviewee: Not really. But I do like to collect old things. Tin plate toys have always been really lovely. During youth everything – for example Star Wars has always been really important and then there were the toys of course. But these were not toys, but collectibles, or something else. So indirectly, maybe. (TA/mk)

In 1969 Hertz envisioned that 'it is possible that as time passes, plastic toys may also become a definite category among later collectors. At the present time, however, it would appear that plastic items will not be collected as a category in themselves, based on material' (Hertz, 1969, 49). The culture of vinyl (designer) toys of the past years have certainly proved that they indeed are collected both because of reasons relating to the material, and also based on their category, character and so on.

Hiddy (owner of Secret Base Entertainment Co. Ltd): Toys are necessary for living! Eat, sleep, collect. I also like to collect things other than toys (*Super 7 The Book*, 2005, 163).

I found the doll for the first time about 20 years ago and knew nothing about it. Just thought it was kinda sad in a twisted way. I bought one and then kept finding more. I have about 83 now...I like that they have lived different lives and have aged differently along the way. I like that little girls cut the hair. I like signs of age and am less interested in them being in pristine condition. I think the more rugged the better...

Long Gone John, founder of the "Sympathy For The Record Industry" music label (Casino, Steve (2005) "Little Miss No Name". *Hi*Fructose*. *Toysploitation Magazine*. *Premiere Issue*, Summer 2005, 44–47).

Jimbo Matison on his love for Ultraman and other Japanese toys: I asked the toy collectors who contributed to this volume why they started collecting Japanese toys. Many of them have the same childhood story as I do: scarred from memories of fruitless searches for Ultraman figure/and now have the driving need to fill that void with lots and lots of shiny plastic Japanese toys. Now that we have better/paying jobs than paper routes, we can have almost all of the toys we want. Current toys we find in toy stores, for vintage figures, we search online (Matison, 2003).

The collecting does not limit itself to the player actions alone, as reflected upon in Matison's quote above. Contemporary toys often come with many accessories. As one interviewee explained, an antropomorphized toy character may even have a collecting hobby of its own: 'When Little-A [a toy character] had a club jacket, he collected pins on it. With the new clothes, the [collecting hobby] is gone' (TP/ap).

What motivates collecting, then? Marjatta Kalliala, who has studied toy-related play in Finnish kindergartens, argues that the limit for wanting toys does not come from

a situation where the objects of desire would come to an end. Rather, the quest for a perfect collection is never fulfilled, but the state of an open collection is not satisfactory either (1999, 261). Completion, in fact, is central to all forms of collection, narration and achievement type of activities, Arrasvuori et al suggest (2010, 6).

As one collects, says Leclerc, one always collects oneself, taking control over emotions of fear and insecurity, and grounding a sense of safety and feelings of empowerment (Leclerc, 2008). A toy collector first gathers, then sorts and finally shows. As Sutton-Smith puts it, collections are mixtures of imagination and mastery (1986, 192).

Nature and culture, the past and present can all be the subjects of collections, of building small ordered worlds amid the chaos all around. For collecting, ultimately, is about creating order in a chaotic world (Blom, 2004, 108). Collectors frequently experience a holistic, autotelic sensation described as 'flow' (Csiksentimihalyi, 1975). Also, a collection allows the collector to play with multiple images of the self and multiple images of others (Belk & Wallendorf, 1994, 245). To some collectors dolls are even child substitutes, writes Holz (1982, 3).

In its highest and most rewarding form, collecting is not merely the accumulation of decorative use of objects, but the enjoyment of the study of one's possessions – learning as much about them as possible, and progressing further, undertaking research in the field of one's interests, and eventually contributing something to the general store of knowledge (Hertz, 1969, 45).

Somewhat surprisingly, the industry seems to have a dismissive attitude against collectors. "Collectors are a pimple on the elephant's ass", Larry Bernstein, Hasbro executive once said, comparing middle-aged men who buy G.I. Joe to the much larger youth market' (Miller, 1998, 107). Surely, adults are still in the minority, when considering the toy consumers of the world. However, interest towards toys has risen at adult age, as I have shown at many times in this thesis. It would not be wise for the industry to carry on with a depreciative attitude towards adults as possible consumers and players. Instead, adults as a target group for toys may well become more important when the now young generations who have been surrounded by toys all their life mature.

The collecting activity extends to the packaging of toys as well: 'even the empty box in which an old toy originally came always has some value, no matter how slight, to collectors' (Hertz, 1969, 167). As my research material shows, so is the case for brand new toys. Abbreviations used by collectors themselves refer to the condition and previous usage of the toy, may it be considered old or new.

MIB means that the artefact is in good condition, in other words 'mint' in its original box. NRFB, again refers to 'never removed from box' and MWMT to 'mint with mint tags'.¹⁵⁹ Among collectors, it is therefore of interest whether the toy has been manipulated by human hand at all after the original sales transaction, or if it has been outside of the box, but still considered to be in a good condition.

Another viewpoint that should be explored is the fact that a toy may also gain value from that it really has been manipulated, as illustrated by the quote above. Another example is Virpi Vihervä, member of the board of the Finnish Doll Association and editor-in-chief of the organization's magazine, who says she appreciates the fact that the old dolls she collects have been played with. She claims that precious dolls are not only collectable items. The fact that they have been played with and touched by a person give the artefact both a story and a feeling that is not attached to a toys that has stayed in its packaging (Kettunen, 2012, 15). This, in my suggestion adds to the *glow* of the toy.

Also, there is the possibility that a toy enthusiast will buy one to play with and one to keep in a pristine condition.

No matter what their ages or what they collect, collectors, at least of material objects, are usually not interested in having two of anything. Duplicates are usually viewed as spares to trade or sell, or to have just in case that the best exemplar becomes damaged and needs replacing. This tendency to seek out items that are the same-but-different is basic to collecting that we highlight it by calling it the Principle of No-Two-Alike. [...] The more important trading is to collectors, the more likely they will keep a separate large stock of spares (Danet & Tamar, 1994, 227-228).

In the contemporary world of adult toy collecting, what Danet and Katriel have written in 1994 does not seem to be entirely correct anymore, as adult players may purchase several of the same toy, for other reasons as well. According to Robbins, who writes about collecting Star Wars merchandise, 'collectors have a psychological investment in both the fantasy and the material world. Thus, many collectors purchase two of each figure, one for "play" or display with other figures, and a second for collecting purposes (the latter remains sealed in its original package)' (Robbins, 2006, 198).

¹⁵⁹ This illustrates how even the toy's tag (or booklet) including its name and back story may become valuable. E.g. MWMT was of importance for the Beanie Babies collectors in particular (see Walsh, 2005, 274).

Multiples reinforce each other and create a contextual universe. One action figure is just a toy; ten figures are a collection. A hundred can be another world (Phoenix, 2006, 7).

The marketing of the coveted things of today is based itself on the consumer understanding that the current series will one day no longer be produced – it will become unavailable (Blom, 2004, 165-166).¹⁶⁰ Interestingly, Blom mentions one aspect of the craze of toy collectables in the past years: He notes that Bandai, the company behind the Pokémon universe, showed great insight in choosing their slogan: 'Gotta catch'em all!'. Hunting and gathering a complete set of a toy series may motivate the adult player, but s/he is perhaps not as likely to be influenced by the toy companies. As for any collection, it is the collector him/herself who decides when it becomes complete.

A blend of sculpture and popular art, many of Kidrobot's exclusive toys are extremely rare and collectible. Artists often create a series of only a few hundred to a few thousand pieces, so once a toy is sold out, it's sold out for ever. Kidrobot toys retail anywhere from \$5 to \$25 000, and many appreciate in value over time (www.kidrobot.com).

Blom sees similarities in a category of products marketed for grown-ups: the collector's editions, items produced explicitly for collectors and not for use, for example 'teddy bears that will be kept from the messy paws of children'. From the viewpoint of mass-produced toys, Barbie dolls are a good example, since they frequently come in limited and therefore, often pricey collector's editions. 'This is the apotheosis of consumption', he writes, 'the utilitarian object that is intended not have a use, but to be placed on a shelf, skipping the phase of circulation and utilization altogether'. But I question this notion of Blom's, for is collecting not a use of the objects anyway, and what about the *displaying* of artefacts? Placing the object on one's shelf is indeed one aspect of adult play with character/designer toys, but only one. My studies have shown that the toys are rarely left on the shelf. Instead, adults interact with these objects in many ways as will be clarified further on.

¹⁶⁰ TY, the toy company which made the 'Beanie Babies' soft toys extremely popular in the 1990s, used the familiar toy company warning: "Get them before they're gone" (Walsh, 2005, 271). On the other hand, regular releases of new additions to a toy series is believed to 'keep collectors happy' as written in the Monster Factory catalogue 2013.



Collector dolls displayed at FAO Schwarz, New York, February 2013.

Like many forms of play, collecting is fraught with paradox. One of these paradoxes is the tension between rationality and passion (Danet and Katriel, 1994). On the one hand, collecting can be seen as a productive activity that generates joy, as the collecting and classifying objects and experiences is a source of joy to both children and adults (Danet and Katriel, 1994, 228; Luutonen, 2007, 152).

In negative terms then again, collecting is often likened to an addiction and search behaviour is frequently described as both an obsession and compulsion (Belk, 1994, 319). Therefore, it also needs to be viewed as a painful activity for, as Blom says (2004, 228) 'every collection is a constant reminder of the loss that it represents'. Some collections vanish after their owner deceases, some are given to museums. In a worst-case scenario, the pieces that were the life and the passion of a collector for many years may end up in the rubbish. In this unfortunate scenario, only the possible glow that surrounds the toy may save it from the trash. A collection that is lost, again, would mean to experience a diminished sense of self for the collector, argues Belk (1994, 321–322). Stewart claims that a characteristic of a collection is that it seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism: The collection replaces historicism with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality (1993, 151).

In the collection, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world. Also, a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms, notes Pearce (1994b, 158).

Collecting is a means to strive for a sense of closure, completion or perfection (Danet & Katriel, 1994, 220). Stewart sees similarities between the collection and art as it is not about the restoration of context of origin of the artefact, but the creation of a new context (1993, 152). To have a collection means to possess a group of objects under a connective theme. To group objects in a series because they are "the same" is to simultaneously signify their difference. The collection comes to exist by means of its principle of organization. In Csikszentimihalyi's (1977) terms, collecting provides a "flow" experience: there is a merging of action and awareness, write Danet and Katriel (1994). Ultimately, collecting is about control (Stewart, 1993, 159).

Old teddy-bears have recently become fashionable collectables. According to a staff member at a London auction house, buyers are attracted to them because 'they look lonely' (Danet and Katriel, 1994, 223).

In the case of toys, the connection between acquiring and adopting should be stressed. Considering character toys, the main area of interest in this thesis, toys are collected from flea markets and other outlets because they are seen anthropomorphized creatures – lonely, forgotten and somewhat pathetic. In other words, they look helpless and need to be rescued from not only oblivion, but possible misuse.

Little Miss No Name is so sad and pathetic that I'm forced to love her. She is the epitome of the 60s Big-Eyed art movement and I adore both for the same reasons. Even the cast-offs are worthy of affection. You are either creeped out, or immediately enamored by the eyes. It is uncanny how a simple exaggeration can provoke such a reaction (Megan Besmirched, author of "Big-Eyed Masters").

Another reason that makes toys an intriguing category to collect is their tactile quality. The sensuous aspects of collecting; the handling, touching, playing with and caring for the collection, as noted by Danet and Katriel (1994, 228–229), are important for the toy collecting player.

Collections are used not only to express aspects of one's direct experiences, they are also used to express fantasies about the self, says Belk (1994, 322). Moreover, as we can see from the following quote, some collectors would also like to control others' opinions

about the collected artefacts and their ideas of using the objects. The example of 'Flo', as described in the book of Belk and Wallendorf, also shows a negative attitude towards actual playing with the toy:

Flo begun collecting Barbies 11 years ago. Flo buys dolls for her daughters and granddaughters, but is dismayed that they do not care for the dolls in a way she thinks they should. She is appalled that her granddaughters actually play with them. ... in saying that she views her collecting as a mothering activity, since mothers are supposed to keep things for their daughters (Belk & Wallendorf, 1994, 245–246).

The motivation to collect may thus be viewed as partly arising from the impulse to seek contact with others, as well as a need for close relationships with others (Formanek, 1994, 329). What is common to all motivations to collect, says Formanek, is a passion for the particular things collected (1994, 334). In sum, collecting is not merely the accumulation of decorative use of objects, but also the enjoyment of learning as much as possible about them and, for example undertaking research in the field of one's interests and by doing so, eventually contributing something to the general store of knowledge (Hertz, 1969, 45).

Pushead (a graphic illustrator) says: 'It is always interesting to see what people have in their collections, as true collectors rarely go out and talk about what they have' (*Super 7 The Book*, 2005, 163). In the course of conducting research for this thesis, I have, however, been able to explore collections of both 'toying artists' and 'everyday players'. In their cabinets of wonder(ful) toys examples of popular mass-produced collected in contemporary toy cultures include, according to my research data, Blythe and Pullip dolls, Uglydolls, and My Little Ponies to name a few. Besides antique toys, dolls from the 1960s and 1970s have started to gain interest among collectors and prices have risen accordingly (Avomaa, 2012, 32). The interest in toys of the 1980s suggests that these creatures will also join the brigade on the wall of fame of most collected 'newer' toys with some 'retro' appeal: My Little Pony collectors may possess collections that contain over 1 000 ponies or pony accessories (Avomaa, 2012, 35).

Star Wars has the biggest collector base of any (toy and entertainment) brand (Geraghty, 2006, 217). The most collected Star Wars merchandise are the action figures (*The Force of Three Generations*, 2011).



Example of toys displayed in the toy collection of Katja Tukiainen and Matti Hagelberg. Photographed by Katja Tukiainen, 2009.

The Star Wars figures are representatives of an entire fantasy world, and their value is concomitant with the level of interest in the films. The toy and film industries feed one another, the toy product is embedded with meaning through the films, attraction to the films is reinforced through play with and display of the products (Robbins, 2006, 198).

According to Sihvonen, the combination of realistic and fantastical elements is typical of children's play but also of the collecting hobbies of adults (2009, 225). Importantly, every successful children's action fantasy like Pokémon, writes Jones, is also an

organizing fantasy. 'Mastering a world, finding the hero's proper place in that world, learning rules and limitations, integrating various powers and functions, completing collections, understanding the connections among the good, the bad, and the in-between can be more important to young fans than the simple excitement of the action' (Jones, 2002, 223). In my understanding, by looking at adult toy collectors, it becomes possible to see similar patterns of behaviour. For the 'collecting hobbyist', toys afford several possibilities of 'toying'.

In conclusion, collecting toys can be seen as a form of play. The collecting hobbyist in his/her play activity thus comes to express meanings that the toy has 1. towards the player him/herself, 2. in relation to other people, 3. in terms of preserving and continuing the lifecycle of the singular toy/a category of toys, 4. as a monetarily valued artefact and 5. as a thing that affords addictive behaviour in terms of aesthetic appreciation, accumulation, studying, manipulating, organizing, displaying, sharing, etc. The writings in connection with the exhibition *Of Toys and Men* exhibition take gentle steps toward a novel understanding of adult toy play by starting: "Luckily, even as an adult, one may return to toys." What remains yet unseen in these texts, is the fact that adults are being creative in their play in more ways than just collecting.



Kiki and Lola, 2012



Artist Mari Kasurinen with her re-interpreted versions of My Little Pony, 2009.

Artists' toying

Play is children's greatest art

- Philosopher Ernest Becker (in Jones, 2002, 59).

Art is...only play.

- Karkama (1981, 24).

Finnish play researcher Yrjö Hirn claims in his *Barnlek* (1916) that in some sense all art can be seen as play (Soini, 1991, 6). According to Hoch, Plato, the initiator of seeing the concept of art as play, lays a foundation for a tradition that at the same time devalues play as 'mere' play. Aristotle on the other hand, 'also recognizes the connection between play and art but outlines the game as an activity which, although not as necessary as work, is just as essential for life as happiness' (Hoch, 2010–2011, 108). In her recent doctoral dissertation, Liina Unt rightfully notes that art and play are not completely analogous and should therefore not be seen as identical (2012, 123). However, contemporary artists are devoting more and more time to engagement with toys:

So I play [with the toys] at the moment, when they enter my art. (TA/kt)

KH: How do you see the toy in relation to art?

Interviewee: It is, because of pop art and in contemporary art, more present. It depends so much on the work or the artist what one wants to communicate through the toy, but I don't see it as a bad tool. (TA/mk)

For Groos, notes Sutton-Smith, play is biology and art is culture (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 135, orig. Groos, 1976). Again, Groos sees artistic enjoyment as the highest and most valuable form of adult play (Groos, 2010, 234–235). Finnish play researcher Yrjö Hirn sees playing as artistic production that has not yet reached its fulfillment, an activity that clearly has connections to actual artistic activities (Laaksonen, 1981b, 10).

Janne Sirén claims that animal pups and children play naturally. Moreover he asks how we adults could loosen the chains of rational, productive activity. According to Sirén, art is one way of letting the imagination run free. In its company we can joke and enter into [play] without prejudice (Sirén, 2012 *Helsingin Taidemuseo.fi* [Museum publication] 01/2012).

In the following, I will go on to explore the relationship between contemporary toys and art. As my research data indicates, toys are frequently used by artists in various ways. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate this part to the ‘artists toying’. I will begin this part of the thesis by exploring toys as an art form. I will continue by looking at the contemporary toy as a material resource and further, a source for artistic inspiration. Lastly, I will introduce the reader to the concept of toy photography and *photoplay*.

Toys as art

Sometimes, the mass-produced toy may be viewed through the lens of art – as artwork in itself. Xavier Roberts, the creator of the Cabbage Patch Kids character toys launched in the 1980s has said: ‘Little People Soft Sculpture Babies [as the dolls were named by their designer] are not toys. They are individually conceived, unique works of art; lovingly hand-crafted collector’s items, each with a distinct personality and disposition’ (Hoffman, 1984, 37). Sometimes, again, it takes an artist’s hand to rise a ‘common plaything’ from the realm of a playful commodity into an artistic piece, which will by this transformation receive an additional, perhaps ‘auratic’ glow.

Toy industry analyst Richard Gottlieb, asks in one of his articles if ‘we [the toy industry people] are too busy creating, selling and just plain doing to recognise that the products that make up our industry are more than just ‘toys’. They are crucial elements in how society sees and expresses itself. Is it important that toys are sometimes used to make fine art? Is it significant that toys at times transcend play and become sculpture?’, he asks (Gottlieb, 2010, 22). In the context of this thesis, I would like to suggest that it is important to see the contemporary mass-produced toy also through its meaning to art. As my research material shows, artists of today are utilizing toys of sorts in their works not only to comment on and develop further ideas about, for example materiality and human relationships with popular culture, but also about serious matters such as sustainability and ecological thinking, not to mention peoples’ interaction with each other.

Toying with art is not a recent phenomenon. Apparently, toys have intrigued artists for a long time. As we have seen, artists as early as Pieter Brueghel the Elder have painted children with their playthings. Many kinds of toys are featured in Brueghel’s work *Children’s Games* (1560). Later on, the toy itself became a medium for artistic expression. As Iva Knobloch notes, after the First World War the toy became a subject of ‘unprecedented interest among artists and pedagogues’ and continues:



The ‘Pretty in Pink’ art doll is, according to the advert, *not* for children, 2011.

Consequently, toys also enjoyed critical interest from educational and artistic magazines. [...] Whereas educational toys were often designed by pedagogues themselves as a teaching aid, the themes of artistic toys were based on the artist’s imagination, which blended with that of children (in their writings, the artists themselves even considered the roots of modern art to lie in the authentic work of children) (Knobloch, 2010–2011, 222).

In her book, *The History of Toys*, Antonia Fraser writes that certain toys can be clearly seen as works of art, and as such they have an independent existence and attraction, apart from their significance as playthings, or their one-time appeal to children (Fraser, 1972, 18). Artists have therefore taken several standpoints to toys by using playthings in the name of the ready-made and as a ‘technique’ or a platform for launching new ideas.

**Anatomically correct:
In the atelier of a toy artist**

In 1923, the German doll-maker Käthe Kruse, said: 'My dolls, particularly my babies, arose from the desire to awaken a feeling that one was holding a real baby in one's arms' (King, 1977, 470). The desire to create 'living dolls' endures in the cultures of toy artists. Let us look more closely at two examples of dolls as an artistic medium and plaything for adults:

A document loaded on YouTube in 2008 features realistic baby dolls. Doll-maker Jamie loves babies and chose her profession accordingly. She creates baby dolls for work. These dolls are made to look as life-like as possible. In attempting to simulate realism to the fullest, Jamie creates dolls that breath, move, feel warm and even have a pulse. The hair, brow and even the tiniest details are done according to the customers' wishes. The customers are mostly adult women, who for one reason or another want to care for, dress and style the baby doll. A part of the women keep their doll a secret, but some take their dolls everywhere in a pram and even show them to passers-by. The documentary asks if this is a harmless hobby or a worrying obsession. In the atelier of the doll artist, I see dolls that look like real babies. But common sense tells me that these are not human children. On an emotional level, to the Reborn dolls, as adult toys, the reaction is different again.

The doll, by its very nature a "provocative object", engenders "confusion between the animate and the inanimate..." (Tiffany, 2000, 92, orig. Hans Bellmer).

Reborn dolls simulate newborn babies in terms of their looks and weight. These vinyl beings are painted with their real life equivalents in mind to the most delicate detail; their 'skin' is painted carefully with many layers and hair sewn to the head one strand (made of mohair) at a time. They have glass balls as eyes, and are dressed in real infant clothes. It is rather difficult to tell the difference between a real baby and a Reborn doll when seeing the doll in a crib. These dolls are not made for children, they are meant to be used as playthings by adults. I visited doll artist Christel Putro in 2008:

I notice that I handle the baby with care. I support its head and stroke its head which is covered with thin hair. The eyes are dark and demand contact. A strange feeling takes over. The doll does not feel artificial at all.

Painting the details of the face and limbs, such as veins and a little glimpse of drool require accuracy. Everything is lit with a lamp used by dermatologists. The lamp reveals how the painting of the skin has succeeded. The paint is oil colour. A completed surface requires several layers of paint and time to dry in between. The vinyl parts are put in the oven so that the paint will attach to the material. The eyes are made of glass, but there are plastic ones too. In recent times the doll artist has come to like dolls with their eyes open after many babies with sleeping faces. The hair is made of mohair, one capillus stuck in the head. The needles come from Germany. The mohair hair can be styled in different hair-do's. The body of the Reborn baby is made of textile on which a vinyl tummy part with a neat navel may be laid. This is done so that the doll can be kept undressed, only wearing a diaper. Silicon grains help to imitate authentic body weight of a baby.

Doll enthusiasts are ready to pay hundreds, even thousands of euros for special editions and dolls created by highly regarded artists. The artists come from many countries, mostly from the U.S.A., UK and Germany. Education in doll design is given on courses. Every doll artist has his or her own style. Special craftsmanship particularly shows in how colours are used. Reborn dolls may be purchased online.

There are even animal babies. I take a look at a small monkey. It is so close to a human baby that I feel startled. More towards fantasy are the fairy babies with pointed ears. They have their audience too. The artist has seen dolls that look like premature babies as well, but that's where she meets her limit. Even dolls that depict older children are left outside the focus, at least for now. What is aimed at is grace instead of a sickly or weak baby doll. Smiling faces bring the most joy to the artist herself.

Doll artists often use accurate and ambitious skills of craftsmanship. Any doll artist who takes her craft seriously knows that the dolls do not only represent delight for the eye. A great part of doll enthusiasts are women, middle-aged collectors, but a Reborn doll must also fit the arms, be beautifully dressed and made to be touched.

Adult dolls

He didn't consider himself an artist although others sometimes gave him that dubious accolade. He was a craftsman, a master craftsman in his field yet he didn't puff himself up over it – for what is self-satisfaction other than the flip side of stagnation? He would not be guilty of either. His job was to craft as skillfully as he could, to create an illusion of human consciousness – shining out of blue or hazel eyes, floating behind half-closed red lips, framed in blonde, raven black or auburn curls – and to let his beautiful girls go into

the world in the hope that they would bring their owners joy.
 (Minervudóttir, Guðrún Eva, *The Dollmaker* translated by Sarah Bowen,
 retrieved at http://www.minervudottir.com/minervudottir.com/Selected_Texts.html)

Clearly our modern conception of dolls as merely children's play things needs adjustment (Bado-Fralick & Sochs Norris, 2010, 33).

An invention by American Matt McMullen represents another area of the adult toy phenomenon. Another genre of anatomically realistic adult-size dolls, namely *Real Dolls*, attracts the audience as toys used for different reasons. These real human size dolls are used in many ways from simply being sex toys to entities on which complex companionships are reflected. Here the dolls function as silent partners in a very literal sense (see <http://www.realdolls.com>, www.still-lovers.com). These dolls have found their way to another artistic medium as well: cinematic storytelling.

Lars and the Real Girl is a 2007 American 'dramedy' film by Nancy Oliver and Craig Gillespie about a socially inept young man who develops a romantic relationship with an anatomically correct Real Doll named 'Bianca' that the character Lars (played by Ryan Gosling) orders from an adult website.

Toys have long been not only a thematic source of inspiration, but a vehicle that allows communication of artistic ideas. Moreover, as seen above, toys have been designed and created by artists, and these playthings have not only been targeted to the child. The boundaries between childhood and adulthood do not seem to be as important for the making of art either – a contemporary artist may seek both inspiration and materials to his or her work from the toy box, as will be elaborated in the following. By doing so, the artist continues a tradition already established by big names in the art world, such as Picasso or Warhol. According to Turner, Warhol especially was a collector of toys himself and in 1983, exhibited 128 paintings at his European dealer Bruno Bischofsberger's gallery in Zurich. They were paintings of toys – 'their imagery taken from the boxes of vintage and wind-up toys he collected' (Turner, 2010–2011, 310).

So, toys are an artistic medium as much as the world of the artists can be seen as a playground. Contemporary artists are 'toying' with both old and new mass-produced toys as will be shown in the following passages.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ In the 21st century, historical art works may 'become' a toy as well: I have for example seen plush toys inspired by Joan Miro, designed 'to encourage discovery of art. Adorable, unique, happy, colourful, educational, soft, lovable, inspiring. Designed by Art Plush- Exler Studio' (See www.artplush.com).



Artist painting toy portraits at the International Toy Fair in Nuremberg, 2013.



Toy designer Dr. Krinkles with his creations, 2012.

Material resource

Art brings forth the childishness contained in the ideal of maturity, says Adorno. Bringing forth the immaturity in a grown-up again, is the ideal of play (Adorno, 2006, 103–104). Play itself can be seen as aesthetic performance (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 34), but using toys as a material resource in the making of art will inevitably, in the artwork, arise questions about childhood, childishness and the aesthetics leaning on immaturity. Play with mass-produced toys is usually seen as non-serious, art again is often regarded as a medium that is inherently serious despite its potentially playful processes. Art may be seen as playful, but not as play per se, as two of my interviewees say:

Plastic art is not play [...] Performing plastic art is play. But I would say that just an artwork does not afford play, but playfulness in thought. (TD/bk)

I went to the Saatchi Gallery, I don't know, five years ago, it's closed now. [...] Anyway, it was great, because, it was a true Disneyland if you want, right, it was something that spoke to our generation, with dealing with current issues, anyway it was very playful, accessible and I really enjoyed being in, and my senses were, how to say, titillated, that's a wrong word but, you know, obviously visually, none of the other senses were really affected but those experiences, just those visual experiences, they're interesting. And I think that that was playful. (D/r)

The process of looking at and enjoying art may be seen playful in their nature. Discussing play, then again, becomes more suitable when considering direct contact and manipulation of toys, just as in the case of 'everyday players' who enjoy ludic engagement with toys for other reasons besides making of art. For example, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami believes that a toy is a more effective vehicle of making his art a part of people's everyday lives than a sculpture or a painting (Phoenix, 2006, 84). The toy has become the blank canvas of the twenty-first century, claims Phoenix.¹⁶² As artefacts removed from their original context of the toyshop and exhibited in shows and galleries, 'toys have metamorphosed into the art objects of a new generation' (Phoenix, 2006, 11). Many toy shops directed at mature audiences function as art galleries as well. According to Phoenix, Japanese fine artists, such as Takashi Murakami and Yoshimoto Nara, were among the first to produce a range of art toys based on their paintings and sculptures. Perhaps this is a phenomenon that could only have originated in Japan because, as Murakami has observed, there is much more flexibility in Japanese attitudes to the nature of art and the art object; a willingness to look at art as something that does not have to exist exclusively in a gallery setting. Although Murakami and Nara have different relationships to the toys they produce, both artists share a desire to make their art relevant to a wider audience in a non-academic and inclusive way (Phoenix, 2006, 49). One of the presumptions in this thesis is that artists are using mass-produced toys in their work, more and more and by doing so, they contribute to the growing adult audiences of toy players. What I mean by this is that artists often use the cornucopia of the ready-made in the realm of toys. Sometimes, only small alterations are made to the toy before utilizing it as a part of e.g. an installation. Sometimes on the other hand, as my research data shows, the mass-produced toy is radically altered by literally mutilating the toy and reassembling it in novel ways before it enters the material sphere of the artwork.

¹⁶² Moreover, a subcategory of designer toys has come to function as a platform for artistic creation (for other audiences besides artists); the DIY designer toy. E.g. Tokidoki advertises its 'Stellina' character in the following way: 'For the first time ever you can customize your own Tokidoki character. DIY Stellina: Tokidoki's most popular unicorno is now a blank canvas you can decorate yourself' (See Tokidoki brochure 2013, 7).



Mari Kasurinen's pop art pony creations, 2009.

KH: Tell me about your pop art project. How did it all begin?

Interviewee: ... I had for a longer time looked for kind of a series that I could start to work on. And with this love for pop art that lives quite strongly in movies, comics and the world of music it led to something else and I want to deal with things that are extremely important to myself, that were in my childhood and never really went away. So Batman really is my hero still in some way. And then came the customization phenomenon and one thing led to another and suddenly I noticed that I was cutting a My Little Pony and wanted to make it a Batman. (Tf/mk)

The mass-produced toy affords here a platform to be built on, something that can be 'played with again' in the name of artistry and at the same time to be mixed with other icons of the popular culture (of playthings). By integrating toys into one's art, the artist may consciously choose to afford the works to be viewed through a playful lens. In other words, by using playthings, an artist may acknowledge the possible experience that the engagement with the artwork will provoke in the viewer/participant. As one of my interviewees puts it: 'I think with toys, in toy experiences there is [a] little [less] criticism involved as there is in art, and also I think that there is less intellectual analysis involved in the toy experience than in art from the users' standpoint' (TP/le). What a toy experience means, then, seems to be inherently more playful than the experience an artwork may afford.



The limbs of the action doll are integrated into Paavo Paunu's sculptures, 2010.

Furthermore, artwork enhanced with material dimensions of contemporary playthings may communicate additional playfulness in the piece.

The affordance of contemporary toys as material media for artists largely depends on the aspirations of the artist 'toying', in other words what kind of ideas the toy or the category of toys is able to communicate. As one of the interviewees expressed: 'Vinyl toys are an unconventional media. My art's value increased when entering the world of vinyl toys. [...] I thought it would be a more lucrative form of art' (TD/ls). As Phoenix notes, vinyl has indeed become a new blank canvas for artistic expression and 'as unpredictable, fantastic, and bizarre as the artists feel like making it' (Phoenix, 2006, 49).



Artist Paavo Paunu uses parts of the Veikka Gustafsson action doll in his art works, 2010.

In this case it is the physical material in itself which functions as a platform for the artist to work on. In the case of the artist toying with My Little Pony, it is the affordance a certain toy type affords to be re-made into portraits of popular cultural characters or, on the other hand, anyone who wants to order a custom-made toy portrait of her/himself. In terms of its physical attributes, similar characteristics of the toy seem to intrigue both the artist toying and the 'everyday player'. In sum, the richer the affordances the toy proposes, the better the process of playing, and again, the more significant the experience with the toy will be.

KH: Tell me about your working method and process, when you start to work on a toy like My Little Pony.

Interviewee: Well it always first starts with the choice of character, it is either a choice of my own or an order from a customer. Then you find an appropriate My Little Pony, its pose is really important and that is what stays. I have tens and then you look for the right pose, you change the mane and tail and then begins the work with the mass [material] and then it's already time for the paint and final varnishing. As a process, it's easy. (TA/mk)



Artist Katja Tukiainen in her studio with a toy character from India, 2009.

Inspiration

[...] there is a doll – I have two dolls that I've painted. The other one is from my childhood, I've got it from my grandfather as a home-coming gift from Russia... there is a painting of that doll and then there is a doll that really is not from my own childhood but which I always played with at my Godmothers. And afterwards I have found a couple of them that I bought for myself, adult toys. And these have found their way to my paintings. (TJA/e/e)

'Picasso likes to have toys lying about his studio, in order to seek inspiration in them' writes Antonia Fraser in the early 1970s (1972, 21). Of the contemporary artists, Jeff Koons' works of art often have their inspirational background in the world of toys. Lubow notes that in Koons' case, if the objects come in miniatures, they are toys. Again, if they are large, they are art (Lubow, 2004). Although in many cases, the artist will create a toy of his/her own, often what is used for inspirational material, is the ready-made.



Artist Hanna Tammi's toys and toy-inspired art, 2009.

More and more artists look to toys for inspiration. As noted in an industry publication, "toy art" is beginning to pop up in public places all over the world'.¹⁶³

According to Phoenix, what motivates toy designers and again the artists when blurring the boundaries between a plaything that is specifically made into a toy and again into a piece of art, is that when toy designers want the credibility that comes from being associated with art rather than commerce, 'the artists want to access to a wider public than the relatively small art world' (Phoenix, 2006, 103).

As we have seen, not only does the artist 'toying' immediately become a toy player when using the toy as a material resource, but also when interacting with the toy so that it inspires the artwork in progress. Contemporary mass-produced toys seem to enable ludic engagement to the toying artists, on many levels. Hirogrim, an illustrator, says that he needs the toy in order to be able to draw: 'My favorite part of collecting is finding a really stupid toy that makes me laugh. It gives me the inspiration that I need to draw' (*Super 7 The Book*, 2005, 163).

Although most of the toys used in the making of art are well-known characters from contemporary toy culture, it needs to be stressed that not all of these toys are from the recent years. One example of popular toys of the past that still make their way into art

¹⁶³ See "Turning toys into art" in *Play it! The Global Toy Magazine, Spielwarenmesse International Toy Fair Nürnberg publication*, 30.01-04.02.2013, 60-62. According to the article, toys such as Lego bricks and Playmobil characters are used as both material and an inspirational resource by artists in Germany and Brazil.

in one way or another, is the Mishka bear from the Moscow Olympic Games from 1980. This character toy came up in at least three different interviews with artists toying. The reasons for liking this particular toy are many, as the quotes demonstrate:

I'm really attracted [to] – I have a picture of Mishka bears here. I was born in the same year when the Olympic Games were held in Moscow, and the mascot back then was Mishka bear. (TA/ja)

...quite often I have painted the Mishka bear [mascot from the Olympic Games in Moscow]. That is a repetitious subject. Those Mishka bears have always been kind of unconditional. [The bear] is visually intriguing...(TA/ele)

I somehow try that I only buy toys that I'm really interested in. [In my toy cabinet] there is Blythe, then there are some bambis. And there is Mishka, Mishka bear and a character from Crocodile Gena. (TA/kt)

So toys are drawn, painted, water-coloured, photographed. What is of utter importance when a toy is used as an inspirational source is that the toy character has a personality, something that is expressed in their bodily composition or otherwise:



Artist Jasmin Anoschkin with toys at her studio, 2009.

There is another kind of doll from Hungary, a friend gave it to me and said to "do something with it". The doll is naked, I have taken off the head and I have made art with it by photographing and painting with watercolours. The doll has become a figure and an element in my artwork (TP/le)

For some, it is of utmost importance that the toy characters express something special with their facial features, as one of the interview excerpts illustrates:

They [the toy characters] have such a lot of expressions and then you think as in photographs of old times, they freeze into one expression and in another moment it might be something else, that they start to live in a way and it becomes easy for me to depict that... and it may be that in my work the characters are kind of still but they are thinking and feeling more than they show outwards, they are experiencing the world, not by doing so much, but just living it. [...] I don't know but it is so rewarding to play with them (TA/ht)



Artist Hanna Tammi with toy character-inspired graphic art, 2009.

Although the toy's figure and expression are what count in thinking about its affordances to be used in art, it is important to see that when used as a physical and visual source of inspiration, toying with these playthings in the name of art does not mean that they would be depicted in the works exactly as they are in reality.

When I have done this bambi, this wooden sculpture, I have bought bambis from flea markets. They [artworks] don't come straight of these toys. I collect, see and wonder and then I start sketching and painting and afterwards sculpting. (TA/ja)

Toys may, in some way still come to bring forward ideas that the artists have about human beings in general. Seen in this way, the affordances that allow the players to anthropomorphize the toy, if even only on the level of thought, are a significant part of its attractiveness for the toying artist:

I have a lot of these doll characters. I don't know, I don't draw them as such, I just take some posture from them...but here is one [doll] which is kind of pondering about life, this doll character. I like it, because it has these chunky [...] and it's skinny at the same time, so it still has its own will and spirit even if it is kind of lost and experiences and wonders about the world and tries to manage. I think it even has toes that point inwards (TA/ht)

Toy photographers

When our eyes met I knew instantly that I'd found a kindred spirit. A kind of "friend." Some say that we tend to fall in love with those who resemble ourselves, and my friends say Blythe and I look alike. But there was something more compelling than just looks—there was an inner beauty that charmed me. We went on our first photo shoot soon after, and so Blythe and I began our strange odyssey. (Garan, Gina (2000) *This is Blythe*. (Foreword), Chronicle Books, U.S.A).

In their book *Practices of Looking* published in 2001, Sturken and Cartwright predicted that visual images will play a central role in the culture of the 21st century. In the context of this thesis it is appropriate to point out that the realm of the visual has indeed become to play a notable part in contemporary toy cultures. The last part of the subchapter dealing with the 'artists' toying' is thus dedicated to a particular form of 'toying with art' – namely toy photography. The reason to highlight this specific play behaviour of adults is because it seems to be a common play pattern among all of the adult toy player profiles as presented in this chapter. They are all at it: the collecting hobbyists, the artists toying, the designers at play and the creative and productive 'everyday players'. Moreover, as you as a reader of this thesis have come to understand by this point, is that a lot of space in this research report is given to making a visual argument of the aforementioned: Visuality is not only one of the major affordances of toys in general, but also something that is seen in the outcomes of what adults do with playthings in contemporary toy cultures. Even more importantly, contemporary toys as visually depicted objects come to prove the very existence of an adult toy culture that would maybe otherwise be hidden from the eyes of a larger audience.

Inanimate objects have been depicted throughout the history of art with the help of various techniques. Still life as thematic portraiture has come to mean not only depicting the human, but photographing things, and also what once was living; plants,

fruits, vegetables and even taxidermy. As I have noted during the years of the research, photographing toys has become enormously popular. I have heard of children who practice photography by photographing their toys as well. What is more interesting in the context of this thesis, is the toy-photographing adult. The motivation to create a still life with toys is not to 'still the life' in the moment of the photograph, but to *animate the inanimate* – to breathe life into plastic or some other material present in the contemporary toy character. A contemporary photographer, Jason Jerde, claims to do "A nice twist on Life Photography; the inanimate kind" by using toys and miniatures.¹⁶⁴

Interviewer: You have this uncanny ability to bring out the attitude of your inanimate subject. They're brought to life in a way that makes it seem like they always have been living and breathing.

Brian McCarty: ... I spend as much time as I can with a toy before planning a shoot, but most of the time the toy stays packed up. I'll take it out and have a good look at it, and then it's all about playing with it in my head. The goal is to bring it to life, let it roam around in my imagination, and see where it wants to go. I hate to use cliché acting terms, but the most important thing for me is the motivation behind the character. Location, situation, lightning, angle, and everything else pretty much flows from that understanding. (See Attaboy (2005) Brian McCarty (interview) *Hi*Fructose*. *Toysploitation Magazine*. *Premiere Issue*, Summer 2005, 7–12).

Pictures, and particularly photographs, inform our conceptions of the 'toyish substance' of playthings. In other words, in images we do recognize what a toy is.¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, when photographed alone, we may not be able to grasp an idea about how large the toy character actually is. When photographed, a toy may then for a moment become measureless and due to that, perhaps more interesting a subject. More fascinating again, is that we also may see a human being in the toy, although if only a brief and passing moment. What most toy photographers do is narrate a story through photography. Artist Laurie Simmons, who has explored dolls through photographs, has noted that 'the doll's expression never changes, and that makes it a potent blank screen upon which a child can project feelings' (Colman, 2004). Apparently, so can an adult.

¹⁶⁴ See <http://artnectar.com/2010/07/inanimate-life-photography-jason-jerde/>.

¹⁶⁵ Toys have also been deliberately used as props in portrait photographs. E.g. the practice of photographing a child with his or her favourite teddybear was common by 1907, writes Walsh (2005, 18).

The difference for adults however is, that they in most cases want to breathe life into plastic and through the camera, see the toy character communicate different expressions and emotions. One player I interviewed during adult toy day in 2009 shared her toy story of a baby doll called Pasi-Aslak (bought in Finland in 1976) whom she takes with her everywhere and has photographed in various situations. In a 'baby photo book' the player has made of the doll, Pasi-Aslak is depicted i.e. enjoying time in a sauna, celebrating a birthday and playing in a swing (ATD/aj).

One of the earliest examples that I have found of something similar to 'toy' photography in the artistic connection, is the one of Hans Bellmer (1902–1975), a German illustrator and graphic designer. Bellmer did not use toys of his contemporary works but constructed a life-size doll that was, according to Tiffany, to become a prominent feature in the legacy of surrealism. The artist published ten photographs of the doll, along with a brief text, in *Minotaure #6* in 1934, and constructed a second doll in 1935 (Tiffany, 2000, 87). What is of particular interest here is that Bellmer's 'mannequins' were made to be photographed. Neither of the two dolls he created were exhibited as artefacts to be observed firsthand. They each appeared originally only in photographs produced by Bellmer (ibid. 88-89).

When comparing the dolls to mass-produced toys, then, the former were designed with the affordance to be photographed, whereas the designers of contemporary toys have maybe not considered this specifically. Nevertheless, photographing toys has become an important activity in contemporary toy cultures, and should therefore be designed even more into an affordance in future toy design.

Another early toy photographer is American Dare Wright (1914–2001), a fashion model turned toy photographer and children's author who may be seen as one of the earliest photographers to have used toys as models in a narrative manner in her work. Her first book *The Lonely Doll* was published in 1957 and it was developed into a series of 'toy stories', featuring not only the doll *Edith* (named after the artist's mother), but other toys such as *the Bears* (See <http://www.darewright.com/>).

"The Lonely Doll' introduces Edith, who lives desperately alone in a grand New York mansion, and who one day finds that two teddy bears, apparently father and son, have come to live with her. [...] Ms. Wright styled the doll, named Edith, after herself, down to its blond ponytail and gold hoop earrings. She not only wrote the books but also took their black-and-white photographs, suffused with melancholy' (Colman, 2004).

The early examples of how dolls have been used in photography illustrate how playthings easily afford to be played with in photographs. Toys can in other words replace the human being without erasing the possibility to see the human in the pictures. Additionally, toys as inanimate objects may add that special something – sometimes even uncanny – element to the photographs.

Today, especially in the realm of digital play spaces such as Flickr, we may see adult doll players actively displaying their beloved doll-companions. In the following, the aim is to briefly explore one of these doll phenomena further, namely, a case study of the doll that transformed from a curiosity in children's toy culture into a photographed cult object and creative resource in the visual toy stories of adults – Blythe.

The popularity of Blythe stems from, according to many, the play activities

of Gina Garan, who started to photograph the doll in the 1990s. In 2000, Garan published the photographic book *This is Blythe*, which continues to raise interest in the phenomenon around the Blythe doll.

As a 'virtual model', Blythe has amassed fans from leading fashion houses such as John Galliano, Prada, Gucci, Vivienne Westwood, Issey Miyake, Versace and Sonia Rykiel. Fashion designer Alexander McQueen launched a line of clothing with American company Target in 2009 for which Blythe functioned as a mannequin. The now deceased McQueen consulted Gina Garan in the production of print and televised materials. The doll elbowed out human models and strengthened its fan base through this campaign.

The reasons to be a Blythe fan are manifold, as is the case in toy relationships in general. The research material allows us to closely examine themes that occur frequently in statements made by the fans: the 'odd' but surprisingly prevailing visual aesthetic of the 1970s and a certain nostalgic value thereof are appreciated in the Blythe doll, as it is, at the same time, fashionably renewed in terms of its looks, clothing and attitude.

User-generated content – thousands of toy photographs posted online – come to verify the existence and expansion of a digital 'dolldom'.



A scan of an original Blythe doll-themed postcard from the Sony Walkman 'Go create' campaign owned by the author, 2001.

At the time of gathering the research material for a research article (March 2012), almost 150 000 doll photographs were presented in the Blythe Blythe Blythe! community on Flickr. The total volume of all Blythe-themed photographs in all digital media environments combined exceeds millions.¹⁶⁶

In photographic play of contemporary toy cultures, like in the case of Blythe as presented above, the player presents himself or herself as an active agent whereas the role of the toy is essentially passive and malleable. Toy characters, especially in the form of contemporary toys, contain the beginning of a story. Although we have seen that 'toy photography' may be viewed as either melancholic or a bit frightening, photoplay with 'dark themes' on social networking sites such as Flickr, is rare compared to fashion and life-style themed photography. Furthermore, accidents, sickness and death seem to inspire more toy designers than the productive toy players. From the player perspective, more desirable conditions are sought after in terms of toy photography.¹⁶⁷

Lastly, toy photography plays an essential part in the popular concept of the traveling toy which has been discussed earlier in the thesis. Although Blythe dolls are a perfect example of what is being photographed, they are by no means the only toy type highlighted through this activity. E.g. Uglydolls seem to inspire this form of ludic engagement:

Photographer Christopher Shea, 36, and his filmmaker wife, Coffy, 33, have 45 dolls in their Berkeley apartment. He takes Uglydolls on his travels and snaps pictures of them everywhere he goes, even asking bikini models at an Australian car show to pose with them (Hix, 2007).

Most of the images on Flickr depicting e.g. Uglydolls, Blythe dolls and Star Wars toys concentrate on fantastic, but positive scenarios. As a general rule of thumb it may be said that artists toying may resort to darker and therefore more serious themes in their toy photographs (just like in the case of Dare Wright, even if her toy photographs are

¹⁶⁶ For more on *photoplay*, see Heljakka, Katriina (2012) "Aren't You A Doll" Toying with Avatars in Digital Playgrounds", *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 2013, 153–170.

¹⁶⁷ See for example: <http://www.behance.net/is> a Creative portfolio site where toy designers (among other graphic/design professionals) exhibit their work and projects. The site also features projects utilizing the Blythe doll. See i.e. <http://www.behance.net/gallery/Peuenos-Luxos/285384>, cited 10.4.2012.

taken for a children's book series) than the creative and productive players that will be discussed in the concluding part of this chapter.¹⁶⁸

Interviewer: Do you carry a box of toys and your camera around wherever you go?

Brian McCarthy: I do, but the camera I carry everywhere is a little Minox subminiature camera that was built for doing close-up shots like copying documents and random spy stuff. ...It's the photo equivalent of a sketch book.

Interviewer: People must give you strange looks.

Brian: Big time, but after well over a decade doing this, I'm pretty numb to it now. Once I've got the camera in-hand, I pretty much tune out and get lost in the shot. More often than not, folks just want to know what I'm doing, and I'm happy to sit and talk. That is, once I know I've got the shot. (See Attaboy (2005) Brian McCarthy (interview) Hi*Fructose. Toysploitation Magazine. Premiere Issue, Summer 2005, 7–12.)

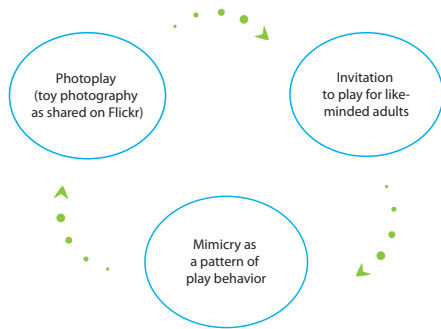
Toy photography does not limit itself to 'artistic' representations of the toy or to character toys in particular. More craft-oriented toys, such as the creations of players utilizing novel construction sets of the past years are exposed on Internet sites specifically dedicated for this activity: "MakeDo's website (mymakedo.com) features online galleries with literally hundreds of photos of exciting creations made by people from all corners of the world. It is a universal resource for a global community of makers who are invited to upload their creations to share and inspire others" (MakeDo Press Release, 2012).

¹⁶⁸ Toy photography does not limit itself to the fantastic toys. For example, some Reborn doll fans display their dolls in different poses, admire and photograph them. Extremists may get the doll a real pram and take the doll on an outing to where people are spending time leisurely, in parks and boutiques. This, however, is not a toy type that comes up frequently when searching for 'toys' for example on Flickr. Therefore, I have mainly concentrated on the photoplay activity concentrating on toys of the more fantastic kind. (This does not mean that there would not be photoplay of any other kind.) Furthermore, Finnish daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat announced on the 27th of June 2012 a photographing competition with a 'paperboy' included in the newspaper. This foldable paper character was meant to be taken on field trips and to be photographed in chosen environments. The photographs would then be uploaded on the newspaper's Facebook site. This example shows that the concept of photographing toys or other 'characters' is growing into a more and more popular activity. (See 'Ota Hesari ja lehdenjakaja mukaan lomalle' [Take Hesari and the paperboy with you on vacation] *Helsingin Sanomat*, 27.6.2012, B3).

When I started to photograph toys such as Uglydoll figurines and Blythe dolls I realized myself that not only is the (digital) camera a means to document, but a means to breathe life into e.g. vinyl. Photographing toys not only means seeing toys in a new light, but giving them life. In authentic environments such as natural settings (the forest or beach) or man-made backgrounds (hotel buildings or a cruise ship) enhance the toy's story, whereas the light and perhaps a breeze enliven a doll so that for a moment, even if only a short one, the toy seems to gain human-like qualities. With a multitude of errors and some fantastic shots I came to understand that photography, for me, is painting life into the toys with light.

To conclude the passage on toy photographers, I would like to express an idea of toy photography as *toythropology*, a form of fanthropology that simultaneously represents play and documents it. My analysis of photoplay on Flickr is the following: The fast-paced, working-life of adults in western societies results in a growing need for play during leisure time, which affects the popularity of social media for the like-minded, affording a playground, which again makes adult toy activities more visible, and turns the photographed and shared toy play functions into invitations to play, which that leads to mimicry as a pattern of play behaviour which again leads to the expanding number of adult toy players, as illustrated in the graph below.

PHOTOPLAY ON FLICKR



Development pattern driving adult photoplay in social media (Flickr).



A collage of my own photoplay featuring my Blythe dolls Kiki and Lola, the 'traveling toys'.



Toy designer Alex Zavaleta presenting an assortment of Super 7 designer toys, 2011.

Designers at play

As we have seen, adults are toying with playthings or playing with toys in several different ways. One important group of adult players analysed in the profiles, as discussed in this chapter, are the designers themselves. We have already elaborated on these players from the viewpoint of designer culture. In the following, I will go on to eschew the toy experiences and toy play behaviour of toy designers in more detail. In order to design for play, one must understand what it means to play. From the viewpoint of toy designers, earlier exposure to toys and active ludic engagement with childhood playthings seems to reinforce interest towards toys at adult age. The aim of the subchapter is to demonstrate the attitudes that designers have when designing contemporary playthings (mainly designer toys) and, at the same time shed some light on the toy stories that are generated in this form of adult toy play. Consequently, I suggest that toy designers may be seen as a group of its own when considering adult players, although there may at the same time be similarities in play patterns as compared to the other groups profiled in this chapter. In other words, toy designers can be collecting hobbyists, artists toying (e.g. toy photographers) and creative players playing during their leisure-time. First and foremost, they are the players who contribute to the scene of contemporary toy cultures by constantly producing new material for play, i.e. new toys.

Even if designer toys as a toy category were seen to belong in the avant-garde if viewed from the viewpoint of toy design and its relation to the mass-produced toys of today, these toys come to have an effect on what is at some point designed in the realm of the 'global giants' of the toy business. What I mean by this is that designer toys function as a perfect example of the *Zeitgeist* in contemporary toy culture – an inspirational resource for followers and thus an example of that the famous trickle-down theory originally introduced by American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929, in his 1899 publication *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and developed further by German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel 1858–1918). The *trickle-down* effect, in the context of toy design, as the author would like to propose, comes to mean the movement from the avant-garde into the mainstream. On the contrary, we can also discuss a *trickle-up* effect when considering designer toys, as many toy designers also draw inspiration for their toys from the 'street-level', such as urban visual culture including for example graffiti and graphic design.

As demonstrated earlier, thanks to the emergence of the designer toy movement, toy design is at least for some part coming out of the closet. This means that due to recent developments in both visual culture and social media, the designers of toys and their work is more visible and therefore more known because more information is available and shared online. As the work of the toy designers in the form of the toys, but also the back stories and universes created for the toy characters, come to in some sense function as invitations to play for many potential adult toy players, I would also like to propose that this very movement of toy designers stepping out into the 'daylight' might have encouraged a lot of the 'everyday adult toy players' to do the same. What this group of toy players is doing will be explored in the last part of this chapter. Let us, however, first concentrate on profiling the toy designers as a group of adult toy players in more detail. The designer toy movement can be seen as a blend of art and toys, claims Jager (2004). One possible reason for the development, as described above, is the very aim of the designers themselves, namely, to turn high art into something more accessible (i.e. 'pervasive') for a potentially playful audience. One of the central characters in the movement is Gary Baseman. According to his own website (<http://www.garybaseman.com/>) 'he crosses many lines of art as a painter, illustrator, video and performance artist, animator, TV/movie producer, curator, and toy designer.' Baseman says that his goal is to blur the lines between fine art and commercial art (Barker and Barraclough, 2005, 17).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Small sculptures that look like dolls: 'similar to graffiti art on display in museums the border of art and triviality are no longer clear among the successors of Keith Haring and Jeff Koons' (van Uffelen, 2010, 79). The quote demonstrates that this genre (although not completely novel in the history) of toys still puzzles us with its hybrid-like qualities.

Additionally, character design that once mainly happened to meet the needs of the digital game industry, has come to mean toy design in the physical world:

At the same time as we are seeing a clear reversion to hand made illustration, character design is venturing more and more confidently from the computer screen into the third dimension. The new yearning for true corporeality is sending graphic designers around the world to the sewing machine to produce stuffed versions of their creations (Novum magazine, 3/2004).

As the boundaries between online and offline, the digital and the corporeal are blending, and as different kinds of hybrid products emerge in the toy and entertainment industries (Heljakka, 2012), toy designers of today might be able to learn from other fields of design. Again, as there is a clear lack of publications about character design in the realm of toys, we must turn to digital games to explore ideas about what it means to design a captivating character. According to Ben Hibon, a Swiss animation director who has worked with digital games, character design is a hybrid discipline which stands between design and illustration. According to Hibon, when working on a character, a designer has to pay attention to multiple aspects:

You have to work your way through a whole range of personalities, charisms and visual images and the figure has to look good from every angle. [...] the most difficult part is creating a figure that is believable. [...] a character needs personality – the observer should be able to imagine where the figure lives and how it might sound.' ("What a good figure needs is character", Novum magazine 03/2004, www.pictoplasma.com).

Dino Alberto, a freelance illustrator and character designer from New York, believes that the most successful kind of character is one that holds the attention of the observer long enough to create the impression that it has 'a life of its own, a real existence'. According to Alberto, 'like with people, figures only become interesting at the moment that they develop a personality and a story, or are placed in a special context' (See "Breathing life into ideas" *Novum magazine* 03/2004). Derrick Hodgson, another character designer says that a figure should 'communicate an idea, draw the observer into their story and capture his attention. For there is always a story – you should be able to read a character, like a book without words' (See "Repetition and rhythm" *Novum magazine* 03/2004). A last lesson to be learned from character designers in the context of this passage, is that a character 'should not only be appealing, but also in some way repellent if it is really

to reach people'. According to character designer Paul Whang, there are some universal constants in what attracts people to faces and characters, but the real spice comes from the unexpected and the unusual (See "Attract and repel" *Novum magazine* 03/2004). So in playing with design – when designing toy characters to come, toy designers must take into account several things. How the designers of today seem to tackle the challenges of breathing life into a character is to formulate a believable back story for the toy character(s). This argument calls for an example taken from what originally developed from first a sketch to a designer toy and then into a whole universe of toy characters that are now sold en masse.

Uglydolls may not be the most attractive plush toys in the world—one has three eyes, another sports buckteeth – but they were born from two people's passion. David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim had both dreamed of making toys since childhood, and when they met at school in New York City ten years ago, they found a kinship as unique as the dolls they imagined. "We both loved illustrating our own characters and coming up with stories", says Horvath. "Things sort of formed. There was this master plan – we just didn't know how or when" (Wilson, 2007 cited in the Uglydoll press kit, 2009).

One of the creators of Uglydolls, David Horvath, has said that the dolls were inspired by his early look on Japanese cartoons, toys and comics (Palmeri & Byrnes, 2004). How the play of two designers was turned into a toy is an intriguing story, as is often the case with the birth of a successful toy. The story of Uglydolls begun with love letters sent by an American to a Korean. David Horvath drew cartoon characters for his girlfriend Sun-Min Kim and she, one day, surprised him with a hand-made version of a cartoon character called Wage. Eric Nakamura, owner of the San Francisco-based store Giant Robot became interested in the toy and wanted to place an order immediately (Walker, 2004).

What happened to me when I saw the Uglydolls for the first time was indeed a wow experience! My first encounter with Ice-Bat is something I will probably never forget. There he was, on a stand at the New York International Toy Fair at Javits Center, and I would not leave without the toy. On the last day of the fair, I picked up my very first Uglydoll and I have not looked back since. I now have a whole collection of Uglics in different sizes and materials. Ice-Bat is still my favourite, although Deer Ugly that was given to me by David Horvath himself, is dear to me too. In fact, Deer Ugly was my travel companion when touring the world in 2009. He is the one featuring in many works of my photoplay.

What is an interesting observation, at the time of writing, is that designer toys as a category have dissolved from the marginal into the mainstream according to the trickle-down theory as explained earlier. Let us take an example. Toilet paper brand Lambi markets a lamb character (*Lambiz*) as follows: People purchasing Lambi toilet paper may receive one by collecting [!] labels from product packaging. Lambiz looks very much like a designer toy such as the Munny character. Even more interestingly, this development also demonstrates a clash between adult and children's cultures. What was originally intended for adults as an artistic vehicle, and what became a creative tool, is now directed purposefully to children as a marketing gimmick.¹⁷⁰

In terms of the Uglydolls, these toys have expanded from the marginal realm of the 'art toy' into wider areas of contemporary toy cultures. Moreover, they have become a massive toy universe that once was born from the interplay between two toy designers-to-be. At the same time, there are some toy companies that try to mimic the success story behind Uglydolls, even their aesthetic that was once quite unique. For one thing, this toy brand is surely one example of toys that can be used to explain the current trend of 'the cute but odd' monster toy that seems to have secured an 'immortal' place on the toy market. Furthermore, as a phenomenon, it has contributed widely to the larger context of contemporary adult toy play: These toys have nowadays come represent one toy type or category that is played by and lovingly displayed by an audience of all ages. (At first adults bought them for fun or décor – a \$20 throw pillow with personality. Soon, she said, "kids with cool parents got a hold of them." (McNeil, 2008). This development points to what anthropologist Margaret Mead called 'reverse heritage' (see Livingstone, 2002).

Another example of creative thinking (or movement between the cultures of adults and children, and on the other hand the personal and the mass-marketed) is the line of soft toys by the U.S.-based The North Bear Company (Make My Own Monster) that utilizes children's drawings and turns them into 3D plush characters. A similar line of soft toys are the Aministrals, marketed 'from their world for their world' and 'huggable soft-dolls inspired by kids' imaginations' (see <http://aminaldolls.com/>). Here, it is the player who has become a designer with the help of the toy company.

What a global giant seems to have learned from the DIY toy culture is that the players enjoy constructing their own doll and in this way, control the outcome. The Monster High Doll series by Mattel now includes a set of doll parts that can be turned into a complete, poseable doll, not unlike the ball-jointed dolls popular with adult players.

¹⁷⁰ The Lambi Kids campaign was launched online in Finland in 2010, a website no longer available during the time of writing the thesis. At the time of writing, the author is still trying to get hold of a Lambiz character for herself.



The owl has been a widely re-created toy-theme of the past years both in hand-made and mass-marketed toys. Howly Owlies, 2012.

No single person has done more to help to define, progress, and legitimize the current movement towards accessible art than Gary Baseman [who] coined the term "Pervasive Art" and he has remained at the forefront of this movement, helping to foster its growth and contextualize it within the contemporary art world (Barker & Barradough, 2005, 14).

What is important to understand here is that art influences contemporary toy design at least indirectly. In practice, this means that the toy designers of today are well informed about and interested in various forms of (visual) art. Many of them have art projects of their own, and, as illustrated by the case of Baseman, they have a wish to make their creations more pervasive for the audience. One possible medium to utilize in this project is the medium that toys afford. Again, as we have seen in the case of artists toying, the contemporary toy cultures come to both inspire and function as a material resource for those who work more in the context of 'high art'. In sum, the development is two-way as artists, graphic designers and toy designers are either a single person or many people who influence each other. These influences travel in time and as a result, in the

contemporary toy, temporal and thematic influences come together in novel ways.

Kuspit sees art toys (as designer toys sometimes are called as well) as possible “participant objects”. He says that they are meant to be used. ‘We get more directly involved with them than if they were simply presented for our abstract edification and contemplation, like official high art’ (Kuspit, 2001, 44). So first and foremost, although having its possible beginnings in the realm of artistic thought, toys made by designers are meant for play. In order to be able to design a toy that affords participatory behaviour, as referred to by Kuspit, the designer must understand what makes a toy attractive and preferably, to have a personal history with toys.¹⁷¹

For example, as Lubow explains, all the prominent players in the Hong Kong designer toy scene began as collectors of vintage children’s toys, ‘driven by a nostalgia for childhood and delight in quirky design’ (Lubow, 2004). ‘With the Hong Kong guys’ writes Dery however, ‘it was all about inventing their own stuff, whereas with the Japanese it was taking the stuff they loved as kids’ (Dery, 2006, 80). Nostalgia is, however, not embraced by all toy designers, as Paul Budnitz writes:

As far as I am concerned nostalgia is a creativity killer, and a life killer. Real, exciting, original art does not depend on nostalgia. Real art is the conveyance of something that is here, now, and immediate, in the object itself. It is a complete feeling, or an idea. (Budnitz, 2006, 8)

So on one hand, toy designers draw inspiration from toys of the past, but come to play with ideas of the ‘here, now and immediate’, as expressed by Budnitz. In practice, this may mean that toy designers manipulate more novel raw-materials such as vinyl or fleece in their designs.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ The ‘Eames Elephant’, the design work of Charles and Ray Eames stemming from 1945 and now produced by Vitra, is at the same time a sculpture, a chair and a toy. Thus, it communicates perfectly the idea of a designer toy as it invites us to see its affordances on both the aesthetic and the operational levels of play. This piece also illustrates that design toys are in fact not an invention of the 1990s.

¹⁷² For some artists, the term toy is somewhat problematic, however. As McGormick writes: ‘Vinyl figures might be trivialized as “toys”, but lineage and legacy this is actually the kind of subgenre that belongs to the species of artists multiples. It is not, however, so easy to fit these works onto a historical arc’ (McGormick, 2006, 118).



Toy designer Ingrid Von Bergen with her creations, 2011.

The ‘producers’ in adult toy player cultures have since recent times also had the possibility to design their own dolls. An example of UK-based Makie Lab illustrates that 3D printers enable toy enthusiasts (with the assistance of a toy company) to design a doll of their own, which the company then produces (see <http://www.makielab.com/>). The services as described above, will most probably continue to expand in the coming years. Still I think that not all people are willing (or able) to create toy stories of their own that would become global hits among other toy players. Thus, the age of the mass-produced does not seem to be coming to an end, even though technology enables us to utilize more advanced DIY tools.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ The term ‘proactive-consumer’ was coined by futurologist Alvin Toffler in 1980 and has been further developed by Axel Bruns from the more up to date ‘prosumer’ into producer. See e.g.: Bruns, Axel (2009) ‘From Prosumer to Producer: Understanding User-Led Content Creation’ in *Transforming Audiences* 2009, 3-4 Sep, 2009, London.



DIY toys at Rotofugi, 2012.

I 'toyed' with the website-based design tool of Makie Lab in summer 2012 but was a bit disappointed with the limited possibilities a player had in terms of designing the aesthetic dimensions of the toy. What I would have liked to see more of, are chances to style the doll even a into a mini-me, a doll with proper avatarial potential. I could, for example, not find a hair style that I wanted the doll to have. Being a Blythe-fan and a player myself, i was also a bit put off by the somewhat uncanny and eerie appearance of the doll. This must have been because of its eyes.

On the contrary, in the age of the ludic turn, I think that the toy design profession and toy designers as a group of adult players will thrive in the future as well. Evidence for this can already be seen, as companies like Evil Robot Designs emerge on the market. Breathing new life into old (mass-produced) toys, Evil Robot Designs takes commissions from everyday people to make interior decoration pieces such as lamps and furniture out of plastic action figures. Their website says:

Every little boy or girl loves to play with toys, however there comes a point in time when life takes over and all those much loved toys get lost in the attic. Evil Robot Designs helps you to preserve those memories by creating stylish and functional pieces suitable for any home. Using only toys, they sculpt stunning lamps with a striking high gloss finish. Whether you want to see your own toys transformed, or let us choose for you, each piece is carefully created and coloured to suit your requirements (<http://www.evilrobotdesigns.com/lamps/>).

As questions about longevity and sustainability will be more stressed in the material culture and industrial production of toys, one possibility lies in the chances of using yesterday's plastic pieces no longer attracting the player as a plaything, to produce something else of the toy, or perhaps, a completely new toy. Future toy designers will thus have many opportunities to come up with new ideas for 'old' toys in order to prolong their lifecycles on the market. What has been a toy, can become another type of a playful product, as the work of Evil Robot Designs demonstrates. Alternatively, the toy can become raw material for something else. All in all, albeit being a group that represents adult toy players, toy designers have to be able to see the serious side of this industry as well.





Cubebot, 2013

Productive and creative (dis)players

Creative people are curious, flexible, persistent, and independent with a tremendous spirit of adventure and a love of play.

- Henri Matisse. French painter (1869–1954)

The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct.

- Carl Jung. Swiss psychoanalyst (1875–1961)

It seems that true creativity stems from the vernacular and rises in its freshness above the dry games of the art world, writes Karkama. He continues by claiming that play theory does not seem to explain contemporary art. The playfully realistic and therefore truthful art may be found outside of institutions, among “ordinary people” (Karkama, 1981, 20, 25).

All play involves creativity, say Kudrowitz and Wallace (2008, 2). How creativity may be seen from the perspective of adult toy play on the other hand, is the task of the next part of the chapter, which will present and discuss what the ‘everyday players’ are doing in terms of toy play. The title of the subchapter illustrates that adult toy play, even from the perspective of ‘ordinary’ people will tell the tale of extraordinary play patterns that will prove most of the previous theorizing on toy play to be insufficient. This is mainly because of adult toy play has previously been forced under the nondescript topic of hobbying, which recognizes activities related to toys as creative, but again, not as play. In the following, I will make an attempt to try to connect the dots between the concepts of productivity, creativity and adult toy play. Additionally, I will accentuate the concept of *display* as another important play pattern in adult toy play. Again, it is important to see how displaying plays an integral part in all of the adult toy player groups that I have profiled here, for to display is a natural continuation of what the collecting hobbyist does, what can be found in the atelier of a toying artist, what a collection of toys a toy designer designs may afford and lastly,



Designer toys from Super 7 Bump and Pegleg displayed for photoplay in Death Valley, 2009.

what is important for the 'everyday' adult toy players of today. Why I have decided to elaborate on the act of displaying in more detail here, is because it is most stressed in my research materials concerning the group of adult toy players that I have interviewed and hereby decided to call 'everyday players'. Moreover, by displaying toys and continuing their toy stories in various ways, the adult toy players have come forward about the play patterns in popular media. The empirical data is thus supported by numerous examples from what I have been able to find (without really looking) in features presented in 'everyday' media such as newspapers and weekly magazines.

Before delving into the last toy player profile, as presented and analysed in this thesis under the topic of the productive and creative (dis)players, it seems right to take a closer look at how creativity has been previously dealt with in association with toys. Imagination and creativity are not the exclusive possessions of children (Lee, 2001, 143). The debate between early learning professionals of the role of the toy as a tool for learning (and creativity for that matter) and not only as an artefact used for leisurely purposes has already been discussed earlier. However, I will briefly go back to some ideas that may constitute the background for the misconception that a mass-produced toy would not encourage its player to creativity.

Let us begin by looking at some critique against toys. In 1957, social critic Roland Barthes feared that the abundance of toys alienated children and destroyed their creative abilities (Chudacoff, 2007, 180). In his *Mythologies*, Barthes expressed his concern for the toys of his time by writing that 'the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator'. He criticized his native French toys in particular, which he noted to usually be based on imitation. Barthes stressed that the toys are meant to produce children who are users, *not* creators (Barthes, 1990, 54, accentuation mine).

As Chudacoff notes, in the 1950s and 1960s most toys could be used in both intended and unintended ways, as they were unconnected to a story line and unrestricted by inflexible rules or software (Chudacoff, 2007, xi). This was the time before the era of license-tied toys had begun.

As presented earlier, American pedagogue Diane Levin argues that the contemporary culture of play does not encourage creativity. According to Levin, the toys of today follow the state of culture by not providing encouragement to be creative (Levin in Kauhanen 2004). In play, the child is capable of self-expression. Children should be allowed to use toys in their own ways, reminds Aula (Aula, Maria-Kaisa; Kuluttajavirasto, 2009).

In the contemporary world, we should not be too concerned as we have, however, learned that children do play creatively with toys, despite the back stories and possible other story lines as connected to them in other media. As Ellen Seiter writes 'we know that children make meanings out of toys that are unanticipated by – perhaps indecipherable to – their adult designers' (Seiter, 1995, 10).

Another critique concerning toys of today has to do with their relation to ownership. Toys as a child's first form of cultural material capital can clearly provoke negative thoughts about acceptance or the lack thereof in the peer group of players, as children tend to want the same kinds of toys. Elkind claims that because of this, 'children come to see toys as vehicles of social acceptance rather than launching pads to the imagination and fantasy' (2007, 17). As adults have the choice to acquire artefacts and services from a much wider array of entertainment culture than children, the pressure to do so when discussing toys does not seem a relevant topic. In other words, as adults are not under pressure to buy and play with 'the right kinds of toys' as children in today's world might in some cases be obliged to, the presumption is that they must be more able to select toys and play patterns for other reasons besides pressure from the peer group. Therefore, when thinking in these terms, we can see the toy playing adult to be more creative in his/her ways of manipulating toys.

On the other hand, it may be more difficult for the adult to indulge in play, as one of my interviewees puts it: 'For a child it is somehow so much easier to express herself [through play] – it just comes [naturally]. But it's so much difficult for the adult in this society' (TA/mk). Although there is an apparent difficulty in today's society to accept the relevance and benefits of adult toy play as a phenomenon, it prevails.

Play makes both children and adults creative, claims Fitzpatrick (1997, 102). What has been said about the differences between children's and adults play, is somewhat contradictory: It has been said that children's and adults' play are different in the sense that the play of children is open or creative, while that of adults is closed, or reactive (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 19). The question thus remains; even though society does not seem to support the play of adults, and if it is therefore more closed and reactive as compared to the play of children – in which ways does creativity as a form of behaviour become manifested in the toy play activities of adults?

As we have seen, to create art has to do with the artist's ability to be playful; to play with ideas, materials and even the art world as an institution. According to play scholar Brown, "the impulse to create art is a result of the play impulse" (2009, 61). But what separates creativity and play, then, is that play creates possibilities and creativity produces ideas and artefacts (Power, 2011, 316). Play with artefacts, like toys, produces experiences some of which may be seen to link with creativity and productivity. Under what kind of conditions does a toy become an artefact that affords creativity?

KH: If you created a toy from scratch, which elements would you load it with so that it would be a powerful an experience as possible?

Interviewee: Of course [make it] as incomplete as possible. I would like the child, who gets it to do something to it so that it would resuscitate. As an artist, it would be wonderful if it involved some colouring and molding... that it could not be played with before something was done to it. It would challenge the child, challenge it to think what s/he ultimately wants from the toy. Because then s/he would indirectly have to think about what to express with it. (TA/mk)

No toy was ever meant to be worshipped, writes Rinker, ‘they all are meant to be played with. Not to do so is a sacrilege’ (1991, 1). As we have seen, a toy designer may suggest toy play patterns by controlling the affordances of the plaything. As the quote above illustrates, a powerful toy experience would in the thinking of one of my interviewees be manifested through a certain kind of incompleteness. How I interpret this is that a complete toy would be uninteresting because the possibilities to manipulate the toy would be exhausted right from the beginning. As Suzuki et al. indeed have discovered, toys high in detail or structure are thought to hinder creative play (Suzuki et al, 1983). Details, therefore, should be kept to an optimal level.

Manipulation, then again, as has been discussed before, may connect with either reflective or operational use of the artefact. In other words, ludic engagement with a toy may happen occur both the level of an exchange of ideas between the toy and the player, sort of a silent dialogue or on the other hand, by physical alteration of the plaything. Sometimes, these may fluctuate: Discovering the different affordances means, as Kyttä describes, that ‘perception and action mix; action reveals new affordances, and the perception of new affordances creates new action’ (2003, 31–32). When reality is adapted to play, a distinctive relationship is established between the function and meaning of the plaything, Lönnqvist says. The operational function is preserved, but a new activity gives the plaything a brand new meaning and “additional content” (1991, 21).

New meanings can therefore be attached to the toy by manipulating it either in reflective or operational ways. We have already dealt with the reflective affordances of toys in the previous chapters. The remainder of this part of the thesis will therefore concentrate on analysing the physical manipulation of contemporary toys, as described by everyday players.

Toys cluster around certain types of activities. I organize toys around three major themes: Active, Creative, and Educational. Some products blend over into several categories. In the area of “Creative” play there is dramatic, as well as social and artistic development (Auerbach, 2009, 22).



In good company, 2012

Creativity not only means the capability to ‘toy with ideas’, but to explore and come up with new ways to use for existing artefacts, as has been discussed in connection with the theory of affordances. Creativity also means to creatively transform raw materials, in this case the materiality of the toy. Dormer claims that making is a form of intellectual and imaginative possession. He says that ‘people who like objects appear to like making similar objects of their own. [...] For example, children who have an obsession, be it horses, aircraft, racing cars – like to draw pictures or make models of these things. Making things is a way of anchoring one’s obsession in one’s imagination’ (Dormer, 1997, 152).

One of my favourite toy play activities during preschool years was to play with Legos. Back in the 1980s these classic plastic bricks were often sold in en masse, not tied to character licenses in the same way they are today. However, the best Lego products that I owned were from the Fabuland series, now sadly discontinued as a range. The special thing about Fabuland was that each pack came with an animal-headed character. There was a postal office with a pig, an ice-cream parlour with a cow, etc. The elements for the buildings in these Lego sets could, of course, be combined in ways only restricted by one’s own imagination. So what I mostly did with with one of my second cousins was to engage in hours of building a special kind of construction – a cruise ship with cabins, pools, restaurants and a clinic. By analysing this form of play now, it is clear to me how many other areas of life such as the visual media and traveling affected our play: We obsessively watched *Love Boat* from television, a popular TV series at that time with a theme song that I cannot escape even now. Also, at this time, taking a cruise from Finland to Sweden was an absolute highlight of many family trips.

Being creative with toys in the name of play can thus mean activities that are linked to creation of other cultural capital as well, as in the fannish activities discussed previously. Traditionally, fans have created fan sites, fanzines and fan art of sorts. In similar ways, the everyday toy players of contemporary toy cultures are playing creatively with the toy stories as initiated by the toy designers. These stories are continued (or challenged) in several ways. In the thinking of Sutton-Smith, adults may resort to solitary play in the name of hobbying. Thankfully he gives the following examples of activities which fit this umbrella term. For Sutton-Smith, adult forms of playful behaviour may have to (besides toys) do with activities such as handicraft and photography (1997, 4). For example, fans of ball-jointed dolls claim that although the dolls are often considered collectible objects, they, in fact, mean more than that: Some fans see them as children or companions, some as decorative objects or expensive toys to be displayed.

To some, however, these dolls have become extensions of other hobbies such as photography or some form of arts & crafts, such as sewing (See i.e. <http://hartsilapset.fi/forum>).

As anthropologist Susan Stewart observes, within contemporary consumer society, the collection takes the place of crafts as the prevailing form of domestic pastime (1993, 166). In association with toy player activities, to collect toys is often combined with more traditional forms of crafting, such as sewing and painting, as these are activities often performed by doll and designer toy collectors. One must not forget about photography either. As seen in the previous sub-chapter about artists toying in the name of toy photography, this form of self-expression could, in my thinking, well be seen also as a contemporary form of crafting (as could collecting, for that matter).

Donald Norman points out that in the new digital age, the consumer’s role is transforming from a spectator to the co-creator, from consuming to producing (2010). How this can be seen in the realm of digital culture is, for example, by how games are becoming remarkably creative and social activities (Jones, 2002, 170–171). What this means as seen from the perspective of adult toy play, then again, is that not only are the players themselves becoming designers of new toys, again as shown in the chapter about the play of designers, but that adults are becoming more creative in extending the toy stories by adding elements to the toy that can be seen as both creative and productive outcomes.

KH: Do toys influence creativity?

DrT: They influence creativity and cooperation with people.

Building upon toy ideas may have been seen more in connection with the category of construction toys – not so much when considering what I focus on in this thesis; dolls, soft toys and action figures. Creative play is usually connected with the category of construction toys such as Lego. What the industry says about construction toys is for example the following: ‘The category is a true advocate for allowing simple effective play, whilst stimulating the mind and challenging children on a number of different platforms. Co-ordination, problem-solving and creativity are all huge elements of constructional play, and are key to a child’s early development’ (See *Toys’n’Playthings*, June 2012, Vol. 31, Nr. 9, 6).

The idea of ‘making and breaking’ has been surprisingly limited to these toys although there is evidence that players enjoy taking their toys apart or building upon them in various ways. As the research material employed in this thesis shows, the concept has been so far used only in a limited number of relatively new toys such as MakeDo or ZoLo:

In a way, the MakeDo construction kits offer a refreshing change to traditional building blocks in offering a conceptual system utilizing recyclable materials found in any home environment. The marketing literature of the company suggests that: MakeDo project kits reusable connector systems enable the easy constructions of reuse-art creations – both small and larger than life size. Every set will have slightly different packaging materials at so every MakeDo creation will turn out slightly differently. [The toy] 'provides a fun way to learn about recycling and reuse' (MakeDo Press Release, 2012).

This play-sculpture game is a pioneer in a totally new category of toys. Without age & gender stereotypes, the game does not in any way bound imagination (ZoLO sales brochure 2012).

The question of how to actualize affordances can also be addressed by destruction. As Rinker puts it, the destroyers in the context of toy play are those individuals who delight in seeing how fast they can destroy a toy. They rarely care if it is your toy or their toy. They are at the cutting edge of toy endurance testing' (1991, 6). Indian toy scholar Sudashar Khanna agrees by saying that the best thing a child can do with a toy is to break it; the next best he can do is to make it (Khanna, 2010, xiii). Many would think that much of the toy play that happens with dolls, action figures and soft toys is imaginative role play. Of course, it is that too, but as Holz writes, doll collecting is actually a multifaceted hobby [!]. 'Collectors enjoy not only buying but also restoring, dressing, and displaying dolls' (Holz, 1982, 3). In an article published in 2013, a doll company manager admits that doll play in the 2010s is more than role-play; 'it's empowerment, creation, customization, and construction' (Sullivan, 2013, 41).

What Susanna likes most is that the toys may be crafted a world of their own (Virtanen 2012, 62).

According to the Doll House association in Finland, there are some 2 000 'hobbyists' in this country (Virtanen 2012, 62). According to one doll house player: 'The [doll] houses are not useless decoration, but have to be played with. In this playing, the dolls are only props. The question is more about interior decoration' (Mäkelä, 2010). The difference between make-believe and other forms of creative play are in the process: 'Like other forms of play, make-believe is dominated by a sense that nothing will come of the activity. Instead, satisfactions must be found in the doing itself', says Henricks (2006, 163).



Vyteri, 2009

In my thinking, the hobbyists can be seen as players, although the motivation to play with the house would stem from an interest towards altering miniature interiors. In fact, imagining the dolls to have a life in these environments can be seen as an adult form of make-believe play, even though a player did not recognize his or her activity as play, as the following quote illustrates: ‘P does not actually play with the dollhouse, but enjoys decorating it. By doing that one may realize dreams in miniature size’ (Walemies, 2011, 36). What is important to stress here is that the play does not only take place in the imagination of the toy player, but also through physical manipulation of the plaything. So this is play, as it happens with a toy.

So if you try to define what a toy is, I think it's the thing that creates interplay between people. (TD/dk)

When children play together, they imitate each other and learn from each other's behavior, interests, and responses, says Auerbach. She continues by referring to the imitative-type games they create (Auerbach, 2004, 97). A toy with good play value, in terms of various affordances, is, then, such a toy that enables interplay between people, that in other words affords dialogues and social creativity.

In the age of social media it becomes possible to see that adults too mimic each others' play behaviour: In new media culture, says Marshall, we are involved in the production of the text and images that become part of our reception and pleasure (2004, 25). Production and modding, tuning of media text, claims Nikunen, represent the most central pleasures of fandom, which also relate to the identity work of the fans (2008, 195). For instance, the doll house players as described above network through for example blogs dedicated to the activity and follow each other's play patterns (and dream worlds).

Jenkins notes that the overwhelming majority of fan parody is produced by men, while “fan fiction” is almost entirely produced by women (2006, 159). According to Jenkins media fan writers and fanzine readers again have been, in most cases, women (2006, 43). These views do not necessarily apply to the everyday toy players, some of which are female, some male. In any case, modern play seems to have much to do with individualized narratives, notes Sutton-Smith, (1997, 105). This means that the (stories of) contemporary toys are being re-written in creative ways:

We're like kids who never grew up,” Christopher Shea says. “We have arguments back and forth with the Uglydolls. We give them each voice and a personality. We know they come with stories, but we don't pay attention to that. We base it on what they look like to us (Hix, 2007).

Dolls cannot be solely seen as female companions today – nor can action figures be said (only) to belong to the realm of boys toys. Contemporary soft toys, as illustrated in the case of the Uglydolls above, have a supposed gender-neutrality as one of their main characteristics.¹⁷⁴

In the case of the doll house, most of the players I have met with through my materials represent women. But, there are men that express interest too: ‘A doll house interests men and boys as well, for aren't we intrigued by [other] miniatures’ (Walemies, 2011, 36). According to a newspaper article about bronies in between their meetings, these toy fans [male fans/players of My Little Pony] make fan art, remixes of songs from the animated series or customize pony toys (von Herzen, 2012, C1). These toy players, again, represent a group that is quite distant from the original target group; they are young adult males as compared to young girls.

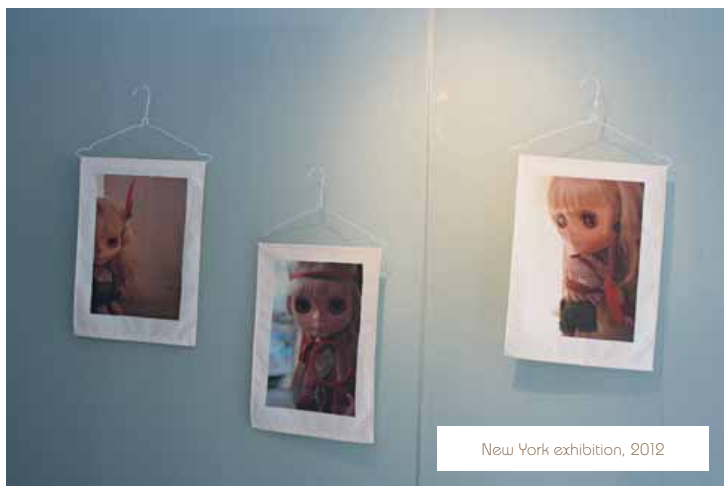
As Fukuda notes, players as users are, however, not mere consumers. They are customers. As the word “customer” has originated from the word “customize”, they are very active and creative and would like to customize their products to their own needs and to their own tastes (Fukuda, 2010, 2).

Some doll house owners spend time and money on finding and collecting objects to their dollhouse. Others make as much of the materials by themselves (Sevänen, 2010). The materially productive attitude of many toy players is even manifested in how the players like to refer to themselves. In the case of Susanna, a toy enthusiast and blogger, rather thinks of herself as an aesthetic and craftsman than an actual toy collector (Virtanen 2012, 62).

According to Metcalf, craft cannot be dematerialized: it must first and foremost remain a physical object (1997, 70). Although toy player activities of the everyday players may be seen to extend to the virtual playgrounds of social media, doing something by hand is considered another integral part of the play activity. In the words of Faythe Levine, the author of ‘Craftifesto’:

The power is in your hands. Craft is personal. To know that something is made by hand, by someone who cares that you like it, makes that object much more enjoyable.” (See “Craftivism – Reclaiming craft & creating community” Exhibition brochure for an exhibition curated by Faythe Levine, October 9th – October 30th, 2008, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay-Lawton Gallery).

¹⁷⁴ The toy stories in the form of photoplay as presented in social media services such as Flickr would need a deeper analysis in case we wanted to know whether or not there are differences in the narratives created by men or women.



Betsy Greer (host of website www.craftivism.com) notes that ‘thanks to the timely convergence of the quest for unity, frustration against consumerism and materialism, and the Internet, “craft” has been rescued and empowered instead of forgotten’. In other words, the emergence of social media may well have had a decisive, positive impact on the making of crafts and on the other hand, the learning about and of creative activities as related to manipulation of contemporary toys.

‘Tacit knowledge is practical, hands on know-how, and it exists in people’, writes Dormer. ‘Consequently tacit knowledge is learned and absorbed by individuals through practice and from other people; it cannot usually be learned from books’ (Dormer, 1997, 147). Curiously, the concept of tacit knowledge also connects with toy play.

The tacit knowledge of activities related to i.e. playing with Blythe dolls is shared online on for example YouTube videos, such as tutorials for re-rooting the dolls hair. Here, tacit knowledge of toy play is made perceivable through social media. Here the activity of crafting blends into play.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Play scholar Kline speaks of the importance of play values like the one connected with hair play (1993, 263) when discussing toys. It is interesting to note that this is a play pattern of equal importance to the adult player. Nancy Zwiers sees the ‘fiddle factor’ as important in toy play, as it encourages the player to develop fine motor skills (Zwiers, 2012).

Dewey claims that any activity, even play, becomes work when it is directed by accomplishment of a definite material result (Dewey, 1934, 291). In the light of the research materials, as discussed above, the principles of adult playfulness in contemporary toy cultures represent activities that are not considered work, but nevertheless entail material traces of productive behaviour. These creations are not born out of labour, but rather of leisurely activities, in which the players have approached toys with at least what may be considered a playful attitude. As a result, their play has produced different outcomes, such as collections, displays, art works, even new toys.

No matter of the degree of the intentionality to produce something, these play practices have manifested themselves in something that may be shared with playful communities both in terms of the material and the virtual. In other words, the players have, through their play activities, partaken during leisure time, created evidence of adult interaction with toys and material that is either physically or digitally perceivable. It is appropriate then, to question Dewey’s stance on play as something that becomes work when it is a productive activity. On the other hand, another passage in Dewey’s writing reveals his attitude towards objects. Dewey admits that ‘Desire and need can be fulfilled only through objective material, and therefore playfulness is also interest in an object’ (1934, 291). How this could be interpreted when discussing adult toy play would be that there clearly is a need to be playful and the desire to acquire and act with toys is a result of their potential playfulness which allows and tempt the players to ludic engagement.

It is not, however, only the adults who are creative with the toys from the perspectives of design and play. Toy characters themselves may be given a ‘creative’ or ‘artistic’ personality as well as the concluding, humorous example of a back story shows: “Rob is a quiet multifaceted guy with intense thoughts on his place in the universe. He frequently reflects on life in the zoo by writing heavy poetry and performing regularly at the ZZ poetry slam” (Zombie Zoo Press Kit, 2012). Whether ‘Rob’ will remain a poet with intense thoughts is ultimately a decision that the player has to make. Only in play will this story of Rob be continued, creatively or otherwise.



Example of a display of my own toys, 2008.

Displays

These toys for me provide a similar experience than in making art, I put on displays and scenarios. I think they can provide emotional comfort and they can provide inspiration giving you new creative ideas (photography series) creative, comforting and relaxing – no judgement, an experience without without critical judgement. (TP/e)

Interaction with toys can be a pastime exercised alone, but many toy players consider being able to show one's toys to others as the most rewarding activity. Before moving on to a conclusion about adult toy player profiles, as clarified and analysed in this chapter, it is time to dedicate some space for a further dimension of adult toy play. As expressed earlier, displaying plays a central role in all of the adult toy players profiled in the previous sections.

The idea of collecting and displaying miniatures is so popular today among both children and adults, that commercially produced cabinets are widely available for this purpose (Danet & Katriel, 1994, 233). Also, collectors have showcases built, boxes or a clear a space for the objects to be placed in, the aim every time being to show the collection to others (Pomian, 1994, 161).

In Daniel Miller's view, the visual display is always complemented by the possibility of a story. Sometimes things present themselves as a means of attaching memory – an externalized memory (Miller, 2008, 64, 86).

According to a critical view, putting a toy into motion may not be considered interesting at all, as one toy enthusiast claims: "Traditional play [such as] animating [toy] characters and pretending (make-believe, role-playing) does not interest Susanna" (Virtanen 2012, 62). There are conflicting views, even amongst toy players themselves, as Rinker comments: 'Toys were meant to be put into motion. Displayed on a shelf, they are in an unnatural state' (Rinker, 1991, 103). Nevertheless, it seems that to many players putting together a display and then admiring it gives the player the biggest gratification.

Children playing with toy soldiers and figures use a great deal of time just arranging them say Hellendoorn and Harinck (1999, 258). Displaying toys does indeed have long traditions in culture. Dolls play important religious and ritual roles for example in India and Japan. In India there is even a traditional festivity built around this concept, namely Bommai Kolu meaning "doll displaying" (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 35).

KH: If you consider this [displaying] an important part of the 'hobby', are you able to be play with other people too? Show your collection?

DrT: That is a way of expressing you, certainly a way of exhibiting activity... It accentuates youth and being alive and toys play help people to be more in touch with their ... and sharing that with other people.

Many collectors are interested in creating pleasing displays of their collections also when contemporary toys are concerned. Under what conditions does display become important as seen from the perspective of play theory?

Erik Erikson, one of the classical theorists of play, says that the value of play is that in play, when 'utilizing his mastery over objects, the child can arrange them in such a way that they permit him to imagine that he is master of his life predicament as well.' To Erikson this point was particularly important in reconciling children with their social as well as physical limitations (Kline, 1993, 154). According to a point made by Groos, the pleasure in play may derive from the work of our own hands... 'here becomes positive creation, the instinct for building, for uniting scattered elements into a new whole' (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 63). How I see this is that the human being has an intrinsic desire to build anew. What better a platform than a collection of toys, with which to exercise this activity?

KH: What do you think that adults do with these kind of toy objects [plastic ponies]?

Interviewee: Well I think they are put on shelves as centrepieces, so they are not really played with. So they are cherished, but it's easier to establish a relationship to them. So it maybe does not require a glass cabinet and that they should only be looked at, so these are maybe easier to make ones own as they already have a known thing in them. Usually it is a character or some thing that is really important. This is how I see it, that it is not necessarily perceived as art. (TA/mk)

Displaying toys is a highly personal act and the choices are endless in this play activity. Some players arrange their toys by theme, others by size, color, manufacturer, or aesthetics. 'Current decorating styles stress the accent piece', claims Rinker (1991, 76). Seen in this light, a displaying adult toy player comes to remind me of a shop window decorator, if not a curator in the context of art. Although displaying would be seen as 'organizing fantasy', it does not exclude the possibility to see the activity as a form of play. Let us take an example of an artist, who enjoys the aesthetics of her toy collection also in terms of humour:

Finnish contemporary artist Rosa Liksom collects Russian animal and fantasy-based toy figures and admits to being a player: "I like to play. I played a lot as a child and I still do. ... I started to collect toys as an adult. ... I have mostly collected velvet coated toys from the Soviet time because delicacy, expressiveness and colours are place in the toys from that era. Looking at them makes one smile" (Tuulikangas, 2012, 23).

[...] collecting, having things for the sake of having them. People may share these, show and tell, but the self-indulgence bit matters most. (TD/Is)

Also, creating toy displays may result in artistic gratification, as Leclerc points out. The toy designer and toy design educator writes: 'From the physical manipulation of an object one can rearrange for display, or real play, the key to one's emotions lies in the ability to forge a strong sense of personality. As one consumes the industrial product, one simultaneously appreciates the artwork' (Leclerc, 2008). A collector creates magic spheres of artefacts of what s/he has accumulated. These 'interiors', as Ilmonen suggests, intrigue both the eye and the mind. They are a collector's way of leaving a trace of themselves for contemporaries and coming generations (Ilmonen, 2007, 74). According to one adult toy player, the most important aspect of building miniature worlds is to capture a particular atmosphere (Ojanen, 2012, 7).

I have them [my toys] hanging from windows and shelves and beds and close to the bed so that they have probably been kind of a support and security and as I am [a certain kind of] artist, I have difficulties in communicating and discussing and writing, or lets say in a way that I would be understood, so it's easier for me to communicate with those toy objects. (TA/ht)

The atmosphere, may sometimes also refer to a pragmatic solution in terms of interior decoration. The uses for Uglydolls, like for designer toys in general, are many. 'There are 30-year-olds who buy the dolls because they look good on their modern sofa' (Mustafa, 2006). It is here at the latest, where the question of affordances in toys pops up again. In order to be displayed in a proper manner, the toy has to fulfil certain requirements as one quote from my interviews shows: 'It has to stand up. Crappy plastic and toys that don't stand up. Weight and feel, solidity make it [the toy] a collectors item' (TD/Is).

One of the reasons why adult toy players have certain requirements for toys that they need to fulfil is probably the fact that toys as displayed artefacts come to speak volumes about who the toy playing and displaying person is him/herself. As Leclerc points out, showcasing the toy (or a collection of them) may affect how others come to see us:

First they gather, then they sort and finally they show. [...] they are keen to showcase to their contemporaries a sampling of our world conscientiously preserved from oblivion. Tell me what you collect and I'll tell you who you are (Leclerc, 2008).

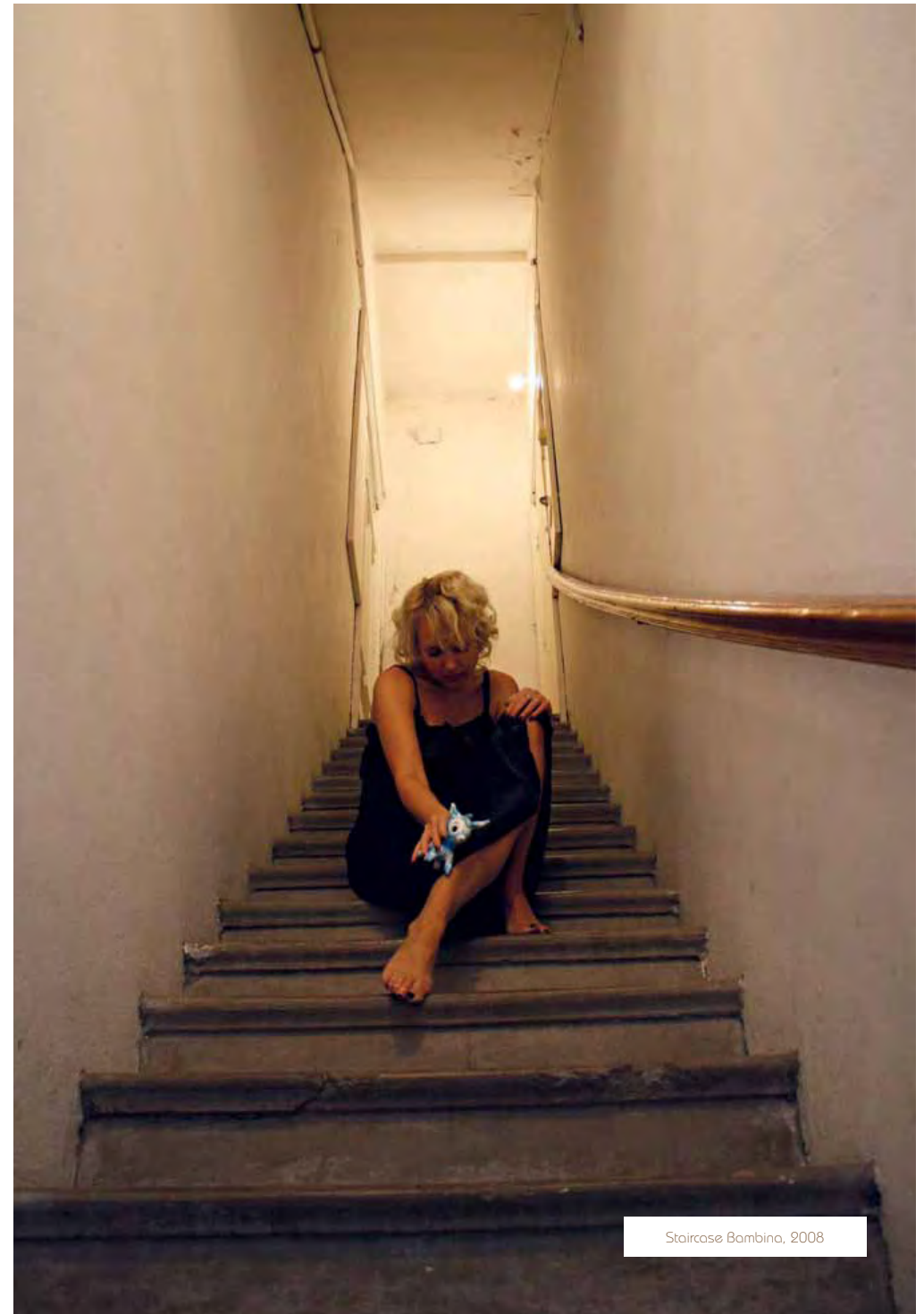
In the displays either fantastic adventures or quiet idylls are depicted: For example, toy enthusiast Susanna shows in a magazine interview how she has displayed her Playmobil figures in two compositions (Virtanen 2012, 62).

Another displayer explains about her soft toy display with the following words: A teddy bear family resides the home midst of a Sunday idyll (Walamies, 2011, 36). Play scenarios are created so that the player may imagine him/herself into this partly imagined space: "I can even enter a miniature world that I have created through my imagination...", says one displayer (Ojanen, 2012, 7). The toy characters may then be seen as vehicles and travel companions who will take the player into imagined worlds.

KH: Is the role of the toys at home decorative, or are they companions with whom you communicate?

Interviewee: I think they should be seen as treasures. They should be [displayed] better in order to be decorative. The cabinet is – they have to be there even if they cannot be seen. I think they are more companions. (TA/kt)

What is often intimately created as eye candy, will ultimately be shared with other toy players. A toy display may, according to one of my interviewees, be seen as a tool for socializing, as it can function as an icebreaker, an opener for a contact in the same way as pets (TP/ps). Also, if the displaying toy player wants to share the scenario with another person that is not present, the player may turn to photographing the toy character: 'Yes, I have photographed him [the toy character]. Sometimes I send my mom pictures of him so that she can see what he has been up to. So he has been photographed a lot' (TP/ap). What the displaying and photographing adult toy players can also be seen as are preservers and documenters of toy culture. Although I believe that Rinker's view of the 'preservers' as 'individuals who never put their toys at risk, keep them in their original boxes, carefully check to make certain every piece or part is present before putting them away, and neatly stack them on the shelf or in the toy box at the same location each and every time' (Rinker, 1991, 6) is on the extreme side, what preserving single toys is to preserve whole cultures of toy play from vanishing. In this way, the people who cherish and preserve their toys are actually doing the history of material culture a great favor. Admittedly, what is preserved at the same time is a chance for future nostalgia. The founder of toy museum Lelulaatikko (engl. Toy Box in Mänttä, Finland), Taina Helin, writes: 'The toy tradition mediates the past to today and preserves it for times in the futures, speaks for it and advances its continuation. Understanding our past comes with many artefacts, for example through details of toys. To peak inside the box of toys opens up perspectives towards understanding oneself and ones past, helps in remembering things from childhood that you may have forgotten altogether. You may feel utter pleasure, perhaps sadness, even experience strong feelings of nostalgia' (see <http://www.helmiina.com/lelulaatikko/>).



Staircase Bambino, 2008



Littlest Pet Shop Blythe doll in a custom-made dress,
I photographed in Bergen, Norway, 2011.

Summary: Adult toy players and shifts in toy culture

To conclude this chapter, I would like to make a summary of what we have learned by looking at both the contexts of toy cultures as presented in Chapter 6 through to Chapter 9, and the toy player profiles as presented in this chapter.

Three major historical shifts may be detected in toy culture, when considering on the one hand the production patterns and on the other hand the aesthetics of toys. Thirdly, the play activities with toys seem to take over a significant amount of influences from other areas of culture – mainly storytelling as presented in other visual media such as the various products of the entertainment industry.

Let us now take a closer look at these three developments. First, during the history of playthings, toys have developed from singular, individually hand-made artefacts of artisans into mass-produced products designed by toy designers, product developers and marketers, mainly in the western world and produced by the industry, mainly in Asia. The material aspect of the production patterns is, an important one to consider, as the choices of material have varied from one era to another.

Second, toys have developed from realistic miniatures into artefacts that often are the result of fantasies regarding personalities, shapes and colours. For instance, the evolution of the teddy bear means a development from a figure that stands on its four legs, and at looking like a real bear, into a cuddly character that mostly is fixed in a sitting position and comes with a fur coat in a multitude of different colours and textures that could not realistically be compared to a living bear. Another example is the horse, which alongside traditional, plastic farm animal or wooden rocking versions of itself has since the 1980s also been transformed into fantastic versions with pastel colours, curly manes, a world of accessories and beauty articles – even wings. Where the bear has become to acquire human traits, the horse, in the world of toys, is available as a character of fantasy more associated with the unicorns in fairytales than the animal in its original physical form. Thus, just like the post-war toys developed in time of the emerging television culture, toys today draw their themes from narratives present in the multiplicity of media forms both visual and digital. Comics, literature, cinematic films, television series, graphic design to mention a few, have a considerable influence on the design, development, marketing and distribution of toys.

What the toy designers and other industry ‘players’ wish to integrate into the toy is first and foremost a ‘wow’ factor, which will attract the players to the plaything. This is done by both visual, verbal and material storytelling, and by giving the toy characteristics which afford emotional attachment.

Moreover, contemporary toys have meanings related to the meanings of the face, the gender issues, the uncanny and the self in adult toy play. Based on design theory, these can be looked at through the concept of affordances. Some toys communicate affordances more effectively than others.

The third trajectory of development in toys relates to the thematic described above, namely, the one concerning play activities. It is generally accepted that toys can be played with in whatever ways the player chooses. The utilitarian aspect of toys is therefore solely connected to the fact that they may be played with. Toys afford the possibility of play (they have play value) which, however, may be directed by the toy designer to some degree through affordances. For example, a doll may be given moving limbs by the designer, which again suggests that the player may pose the toy in different ways. The activities that the players partake in may be manifested in a multitude of ways, as described in this thesis.

What is particularly interesting to notice is that the social aspects of digital media culture has made these play patterns more visible and because of that, more exposed to the research perspective. The ways adults engage with toys – how they play with these objects – show a significant amount of creativity and productivity.

These actions are not only connected to activities that relate to ‘hobbying’ where the toy itself is produced by the player, but, and perhaps more interestingly when thinking about the scope of this thesis in the fact that even mass-produced toys may encourage their players to engage through play in such creative and productive actions that maybe never occurred to the original designers of these products.

Dolls, soft toys and action figures are either implanted in narratives started by the toy designer or company – or they are given leading parts in completely new stories imagined by the players themselves. Materially, these stories become visible to the world for example in patterns of play related to sewing clothes, re-inventing hair and make-up, displaying, photographing and sharing the toy stories through fandom of sorts – both when toy enthusiasts with similar interests meet physically or when they connect with fellow toy players online.

The customizing and personalization of mass-produced toys points at a certain desire to manipulate and alter – even subvert, the suggested play patterns in creative ways and by doing so, give the toy character novel meanings. In the case of dolls, soft toys and action figures, as proposed in the thesis at hand, the play patterns of adults seem to direct the thinking of the researcher towards the origins of toy culture – the craft of making singular, personal and unique toys. In the end, perhaps, one could say that the toy play patterns of adults today carry similarities to the original patterns of toy production. Ultimately, in the core of both of these activities is to re-invent the world by creation of things that show the touch of the hand, the skill of the artisan – or the player.

As the benefits of play, Brannen lists the following: total abandonment, no worry, joy, clear thinking, energy, curiosity, wonderment, pride, connection, movement, imagination, relaxation, therapeutic (2002, 67–77). The examples of toy player profiles stress the importance of many of these factors.

All children use play therapeutically as a way of dealing with stress, claims Elkind (2007, 113). In DIY art cultures, the therapeutic value of making and creating is considered one of the most central reasons for being productive. The similarities in this, as compared to adult toy play in contemporary toy cultures, seem astonishingly alike. Toy play is carried out in order to get enjoyment, but this enjoyment can nevertheless not be seen to stem from the same factors for all toy players.

To be a productive and creative toy (dis)player, must in this light be seen as an activity that in the name of the toy affords a continuous source of flow to the player. As one adult toy player put her words in a news paper article: ‘It would actually be a funny thought that the doll house would be finished one day. Then it would turn out to unneeded clutter that would just stand on the table’ (Virtanen 2012, 62).

The toy lives on and gives a glow, ultimately, as long as it affords play value that is actualized, either in terms of reflective or operational means. Maybe most central for the toy experience is then that the toy itself affords never-ending possibilities to play with it, a possibility to lose oneself in the flowing experience of play forever.

In sum, to make a reference to typologies and theories of play, as discussed in Chapter 5, adult play with character toys such as dolls of three kinds (dolls in traditional thinking, action figures and soft toys) seems to represent many types of play (solitary and social object play, imaginative/pretend play, creative play, manipulative play, make-believe play, learning play as following the ideas of e.g. Sutton-Smith, Caillois and Piaget). For adults, the activity of play is recognized to have therapeutic value (Freud) and seems further motivated by many factors; there is surplus energy (Santayana, Spencer and Groos) that may be used for play during leisure time. This again allows immersing oneself in both relaxing (Groos) and exciting activities with toys which may be motivated by the play-drive (Schiller) and that may result in learning i.e. improving skills of sorts (Piaget, Groos). When toys are manipulated creatively, there will be material outcomes (Schiller).

TOYS AS MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCED OBJECTS (adults)



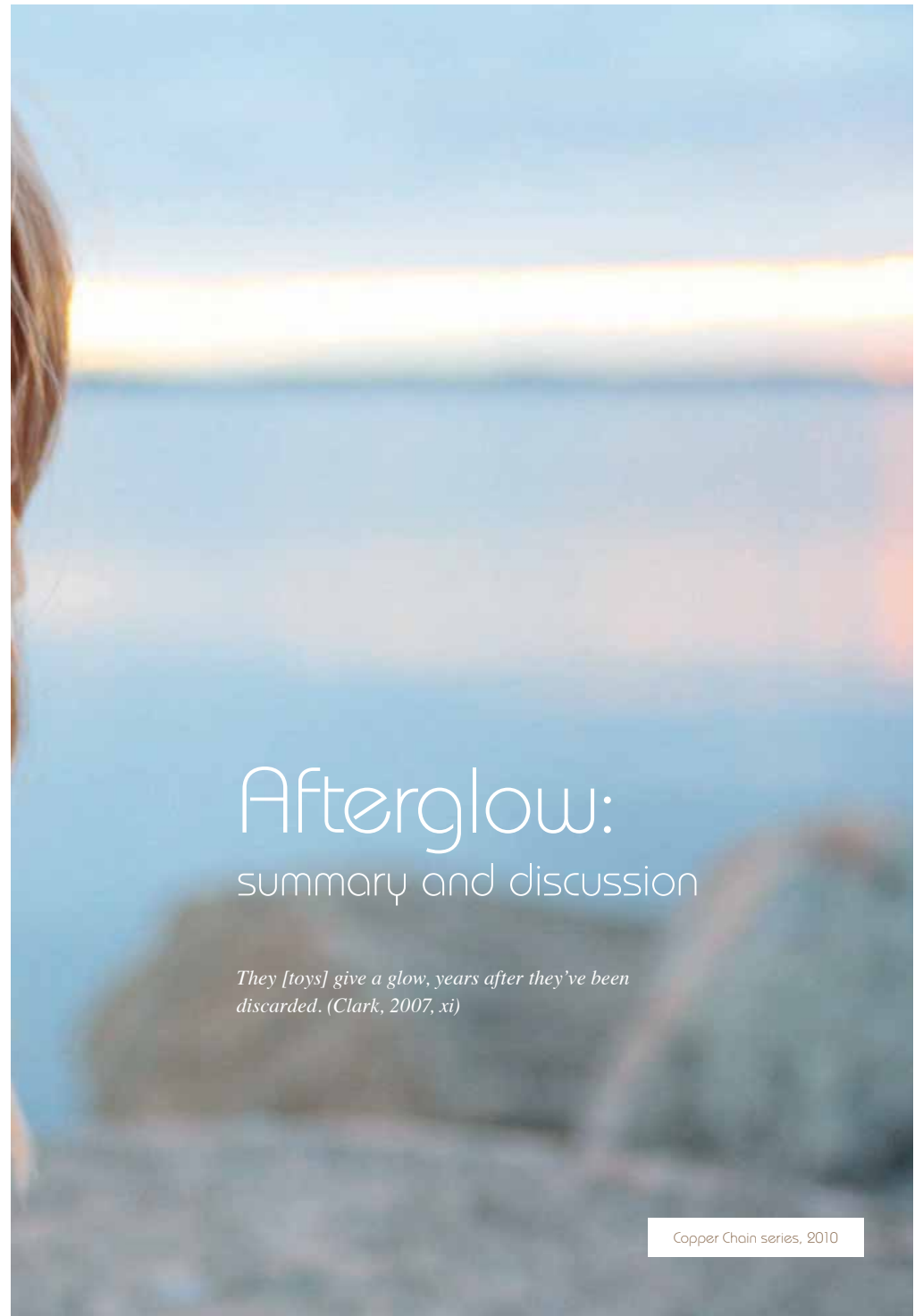
Toys as meaningful objects for adults.

Documentation of adult toy play recorded by the players themselves (e.g. photoplay) make it possible for us study the scenarios featuring toy characters. These toy stories reveal that adults, in their play with toys, are in many cases aiming at wish-fulfilment by continuing the stories of their toys. It is then possible to see that the toys have become extensions of their players, in fact, used as avatars. Potential players may first be *onlookers* (such as the flickerers of toy-themed images on Flickr) (Parten) but be invited to participate in play through these documentations of play acts. In other words, the potential players become intrigued by what other adult toy fans and players are doing (Bateson), and ultimately, start to mimic their behaviour (Caillois), which will again, once documented, become new invitations to play.

As we have learned, players play in different ways, yet many of the play patterns are similar across the profiles, as described above. I am sure there are many more ways in existence, and many more ways of engaging with toys to come. Ultimately, toy play may give the player unforgettable playing experiences, but to provoke these experiences we must lose ourselves in the activity of play either alone or in the company of others. As shown here, there is a tremendous amount of information, knowledge and meaning that is carried in a toy. Whether this potentiality of the toy will be released and actualized is for the players to decide. For in order to *toy* we must be willing and able to play.

...perhaps what one learns from play is how to play better (Sutton-Smith, 1995, 281).





Afterglow:

summary and discussion

They [toys] give a glow, years after they've been discarded. (Clark, 2007, xi)

Copper Chain series, 2010



Chapter 11: Overview: Principles of adult (play)fulness

TOYS.

They reveal what we believe and value, encourage and endorse and dismiss and fear. They remind us who we were, who we are, and who we hope to become.

- The Strong Museum of Play

This thesis has investigated the multidimensional phenomenon of adult toy play. The purpose of my study has been to explore some of these dimensions. The main two questions I have asked are:

1. *How are adults using contemporary toys today?*
2. *What can (toy) designers learn from this?*

This chapter concludes the research report by summarizing the findings. I make a final attempt to characterize the nature of the principles of adult toy play in contemporary cultures.

A description of a particular phenomenon cannot pretend to be exhaustive or definitive (Carroll & Tafoya, 2000, 8). To articulate the Zeitgeist in terms of adult attitudes towards object play and on the other hand the material and digital manifestations that these play activities result in, I have had to take several positions not only as a researcher, but as a player and a participant in the playgrounds and cultural contexts of play.

I have approached the phenomenon from several directions. This is why the thesis represents cross-sections of the manifold dimensions of adult toy play, such as toys, their designers, cultures and players. I have attempted to elaborate on these dimensions by examining first the conceptual understandings of the notion of 'toy', including the understandings of toy designers. I have expanded the analysis by reviewing theories and categorizations of play to form a suggestion on how toy play can be understood as compared to previous understandings of play in general. Moreover, I have analyzed toy play from the viewpoint of adults and finally in addition to mapping different attitudes towards toys and engagement with them, profiled different contexts, cultures and play patterns in relation to them. I will now move on to summarize the findings of the study and to define the principles of play that can be detected when analyzing the research materials.

Principle 1: Afforded play

As we have seen, the potentiality in toys can be examined within the framework of the theory of affordances. A toy does not, according to traditional thinking, need instructions in order to be played with. Instead, the toy designer may ask him/herself whether the toy in development will have affordances, a certain kind of action possibilities which limit and guide the player towards particular activities (Kudrowitz & Wallace, 2008) such as play patterns. The toy designer, therefore, needs to understand both the phenomenon of play and further, to recognize what is valued by the potential users i.e. the players. Furthermore, what is required from the toy designer is for them to wow the potential toy player by giving the toy-to-be such elements and features (e.g. visual and/or narrative) which will cause an experience of wow even before the player acquires the toy.

What designing play value means in character toys such as different kinds of dolls, is creating affordances that allow creative and repeated acts of playing with the toy. By exploring player engagement with toys we may find out more about the creativity expressed in connection to interaction with these playful artefacts.

Popular culture is eager to please (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, 2). Toys share this same tactic of pleasurable persuasion. This can be regulated by designing affordances into the toy. By designing playful affordances, or – suggestions for play patterns – and integrating these action possibilities into the toy, the designer may propose various ways of use for the player. For example, when considering the playthings of particular interest to the study, namely dolls, action figures and soft toys, the designer may encourage the player e.g. to pose the toy (by designing movable joints), to engage in hair play (by giving the toy hair that affords styling) or to change the eye colour of the toy (by giving the player the chance to change the eye ‘chips’). All of these affordances are of interest for e.g. the photoplaying adults.

Despite designed affordances, research shows that players tend to treat toys in creative – sometimes even subversive – ways (see i.e. Karimäki 2007) as compared to the original idea of the designer. ‘Potential affordances can be designed and created actively. Ultimately, however, the actualization of affordances depends on the individual’, reminds Kyttä (2003, 106). The results of my study support this idea.

Principle 2: Intended/motivated play

What is the intrinsic motivation for play, how is this motivation manifested and how can it be studied and observed? In sum, what motivates the activity of toy play? According to Maritta Hännikäinen, a child itself is not conscious of any other motives apart from

that s/he wants to play (Hännikäinen, 1991, 102, orig. Vygotsky, 1978). In adults, the motivation to play seems to manifest itself in a more intentional manner. In the light of my study, it links with the desire to interact with both playthings and other players, in other words, to not only carry out a silent dialogue with the toy, but to carry out actual dialogues with other players. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the many examples in the thesis, the player must first become attracted to their toy before any engagement may take place. Most often this attraction is based in aesthetics, as a player is drawn to a toy because of its looks, may they express cuteness or oddity, or a combination of them (namely, what constitutes the *wow* in a toy). This aesthetic also contributes to the storytelling capacity of contemporary toy characters. Although there often is a written story accompanying the toy, its storyness may also deliver wow on a purely visual level. I have discussed my personal motivations to acquire toys, and the aesthetics certainly plays a decisive role in why I am attracted to (and motivated by) certain playthings and not others. For me, the aesthetic dimension of toys has thus been a crucial factor in acquiring, collecting, displaying and photographing – simply put, in playing with the toys.

By employing autoplay as a method of producing further research material for my study, i.e. creating and evaluating self-produced data (i.e. the outcomes of photoplay) I could create a position for myself similar to the players who display their toy-related activities online. Producing works of my own also meant that by using this parallel data as compared to photoplay of others, I did not need to meet the more practical challenge of tackling issues regarding copyrights. Moreover, by becoming a ‘toying’ artist, I could develop my understanding of the capacity of playthings to function as (material, thematic and/or aesthetic) models and muses in the realm of visual art. Unexpectedly, photoplaying developed my thinking of not only toys as artefacts that afford various forms of play (e.g. manipulation and imaginative play), but playing as a conceptual way of being and observing in the world and therefore, deepening my understanding of similarities between play with toys and playing games.

One of the insights regarding adult toy play is that it seems to function in a cyclical mode: The play need in adults first manifests itself in being wowed by the toy, then in the acquiring of the toy. When interacting with the toy and experiencing *flow*, this activity then transforms into intentional creative behavior that occurs through the manipulation of the toy and which again turns into productive outcomes. These creations, e.g. in the name of photoplay, become invitations to play to other players. The socialization that happens through adult toy play is enabled by social interactive media and again, results in aesthetic pleasure for the viewer of photoplay and probable new relationships between toy players. All in all, new productive outcomes of toy play, like the aforementioned toy photography, inspire and encourage new players to join the ‘game’ by participating in it and furthermore, new toy-inspired creations.

Principle 3: Socialized play

Open-ended play may be an end in itself. Adult engagement in toy play does not always, however, reach perfection through pure process. In most cases adults wish to see that their toy play results in transformations of various materials – creative outcomes of sorts – and that these manifestations of productive play may be shared with fellow players. Play with dolls, action figures and soft toys then represents open-ended object play that is manifested through adult activities either solitarily or socially.

Moreover, as I have tried to demonstrate, the self-oriented values in toy play refer to the pleasures the object provides to the player him/herself. Other-oriented values on the other hand, mean the acceptance of others, that the user will gain through this object. In other words, how the adult player may employ the toy in his/her ludic engagement with the artefact, is on one hand to gain personal gratification from play (solitary object play) and on the other hand, to explore how playing with the toy allows intra-personal ludic engagement (social object play). Based on these activities, toys clearly afford communication on both a micro and a macro level. It is then also a task up to the toy designers to explore how they can encourage the communicative affordances of the toy e.g. through interesting back stories (both online and offline) that attract the players to participate in the creation of additional meanings for the toy.

Perhaps sometime in the future, someone will indeed define toy play as solitary pleasure in the consumption and the manipulation of novel but unnecessary objects (Sutton-Smith, 1986, 170).

In the framework of the findings presented in this thesis, I would like to think that the time Sutton-Smith points to in the above citation, is here. At the same time, I suggest that what the expansion from the play environments in the physical world into the playgrounds of digital spaces shows, is that not only are toys cherished and creatively cultivated (and curated) artefacts in the intimate toy-player relationship, but also communicative artefacts that players, through various play activities want to care for and share with like-minded players. It is in this very realm of play activities that a toy object may be given a lasting, even auratic *glow*.

Principle 4: Hidden/perceived play

One of the many interesting findings in the study is that while the toy industry is taken as an area of activities that is secretive and thus characterized by a somewhat hidden

nature, the offline activities of adult toy players follow similar ‘hidden paths’. On a more concrete level, this means that at least in the western world, toy stores for mature audiences are sometimes hard to find in the physical environments, that the toys are kept in the privacy of the living spaces of the player, and that play mostly happens in ways unseen to the public eye with the exception of conventions and other sorts of gatherings, where the like-minded toy players come together. Online environments, on the contrary, tell a different story: In social media, adult play activities have become more perceivable (websites, photo management applications, fan forums and YouTube tutorials to name a few). The meanings attached and developed around toys expand purposely by the means of visual and communicational possibilities of the Internet. The Internet may thus be seen as a focal and meeting point for toy hobbyists – the toy fans and players alike.

When ‘flickering’ through photo management applications such as Flickr, one may easily encounter millions of toy-themed photographs linking to the websites of several different lively communities that have emerged around various toys. It quickly becomes clear that these images are the outcome of creative and productive adult toy play activities. Evidently, what is still kept from the public eye in the physical world, flourishes on the digital playgrounds as cultures of adult toy play. In sum, adult toy play is both an individual and social activity that is represented in the physical world (but shyly) and digital environments (much more openly).

Another observation that needs attention is the difference in terms of perceiving the designer in traditional, mass-marketed toys and the so-called designer toys that have gained popularity and visibility particularly through play activities online. When conducting research on toys the commercial, mass-produced playthings usually keep their designers behind a curtain, whereas art-like designer toys get their kudos from the person behind them. The appreciation of the toy designer rises among toy fans and elevates the designer to a position that could be compared to the one of a recognized artist. As seen before, many artists deliberately admit to playing when creating their works of art. The toy artists, in parallel with the artists toying’ are then not to be overlooked, when analyzing contemporary play cultures.

It is impossible to assess the number of adult toy players globally, due to the semi-hidden nature of the phenomenon. Toys are perceivable as adult-owned, physical artefacts in contemporary culture, but playful engagement with them needs to be explored in spaces and contexts that are not necessarily immediately available in our everyday material existence. This is one of the reasons why I have had to look elsewhere. It almost seems like the phenomenon is playing hide and seek with the researcher, in the manner of the infamous Fort-Da game, as presented by Freud in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (orig. publ. 1920).



Not the way to treat toys: Detail of video artist Pierrick Sorin's (1960-) work *Fireplace*, 2011, as seen at the exhibition 'Of Toys and Men' at Helsinki Art Museum Tennis Palace 24.2.–20.5.2012. The works at the exhibition comment toys and play. Photograph by the author.

Principle 5: Dismissed play

As suggested, visual culture and activities in 'new' social media, meaning actions taking place in the networking sites of the Internet, reveal the 'real' toy stories of people who are coming more actively out of their toy closets by presenting their toys and play practices around these objects through the means provided by applications of social media. At the same time, adults are neglected as toy players at least in academic studies related to toys or play. Or rather, the interaction with playthings is spoken of in the terms of hobbying and not 'toying' with playthings. Playing with toys and the vocabulary related to this form of play is mostly restricted to children's culture. As a result, adults who are eager to express an enthusiasm for toys still rarely admit to *playing* with them. Furthermore, even dolls that clearly represent toys are sometimes not referred to as things for play, but as collectibles (Heljakka, 2011). The dismissive attitude towards adults, toys and play does not, however, place dolls, soft toys or figurines outside of the sphere of play, not even in the case of adult toy owners and collectors.

Dismissing the value of play by calling it frivolous, is a frivolous gesture in itself, as Sutton-Smith wisely puts (1997, 208). In my thinking, the dismissive view on adult toy play has to do with the negative assumptions related to the fear of being labelled as infantile. In fact, as illustrated in sociology, the infantilization of culture is a major concern that deals more broadly with aspects of human development considered negative such as the 'Peter Pan syndrome', 'forever kids' and 'big babies' (see e.g. Bly, 1996, Cross, 2008 and Bywater, 2008).

It may be that adulthood is something that is easier for others to determine, not something that we could necessarily determine by ourselves. Adulthood thus becomes a matter of definition of our external environment, a concept determined by passages indicated by societal instruments such as the government and its laws. Therefore, society may see the toy playing adult as an infantilized adult, although in our thinking (and in some activities such as toy play) we may see ourselves as child-like but not childish, or simply 'kids at heart'. Another interesting question concerns the rhetoric of toy play. Next, I will address this topic in more detail.

Discharging the politics of adult toy play

Adults do not want to refer to 'play' with the word 'toy'. (TD/bk)

As we have seen throughout this thesis, it is hard for many adults to refer to their activities with toys as play. Adult toy play is often disguised behind various activities that are categorically thought of as hobbies, such as collecting. In Groos' meaning, hobbies of adults usually resemble activities partaken in play, but often have aims outside of the intrinsic value of play (Groos & Baldwin 2010, 248–249). As noted, adults admitting to having a toy hobby do not necessarily understand (or want to communicate) their practices with playthings as play, but may admit that their objects of interest have a certain 'playfulness' to them. In other words, it is much more common to hear about adults 'hobbying' with e.g. dolls, doll houses or other miniatures. For some 'players' it is important to stress that they, in fact, are *not* playing with their toys at all.

To investigate the reason for this further, a researcher would need to pose the exact question of why there is refusal in seeing toy-related activities as a form of play and not merely as hobbying, which seems far too general a concept which may point to leisure-time activities as a non-defined entity.

One major observation that the research materials reveal, is the constant discursive debate that goes on in the toy players' way of reflecting upon either the artefacts they are

toying with, or the playing activity itself. In my view, an interpretation of this ongoing debate around adults, toys and play connects, on the one hand to a historical idea of toys as insignificant objects and on the other hand to the thinking that still regards playing with toys as an infantile and therefore childish activity that only carries meaning during one phase of our lives, namely childhood. The resistance against the pure possibility of the phenomenon of adult toy play becomes clear in not only the discourse of toy designers, but among the players themselves.

‘Unfortunately, people today devalue their play. We tend to play less and less, the older we become’, says Terr (1999, 25). In conclusion, I would propose that to play with or without toys at adult age should be more acknowledged, accepted and appreciated in our everyday lives. Henricks proposes a healthy way of looking at play and noting that in this activity, one can set aside customary behaviors:

“Inside the magic circle of play, so some argue, players take liberties with the policies and practices of their societies. They set customary behaviors aside. Inside the circle, they can practice life, parody it, fantasize about it, and even resist it. And during these explorations, they understand that what happens on the playground gets judged only by the rules of the playground” (Henricks, 2011, 225).

Although the benefits of play have been recognized by many, it still seems that the world is reluctant to embrace the benefits of toy play, at least when adults are concerned. There thus seems to be resistance against the discharging of the politics of (toy) play, not only in the adult world, but also in the maturing. Tweens are reluctant to discuss their toy playing activities as ‘play’, but again, are eager to confess to ‘hobbying’ with the toys, which are either hand-made or industrially produced. In other words, it is acceptable to admit to having toys and interacting with them, if this happens inside the safe circle of hobbying. For having a hobby is considered positive, the adult – or the teenager – need not be ashamed of their activities.

Getting to know toys can well continue into adulthood. One who has the patience to get deeply involved in the hobby, finds unlimited dimensions from toys. Luckily there are adults who are interested in the theme. (V.V. in Friman, 2009, 24)

On a larger scale, I believe that this tension between what is acceptable to do during one’s leisure time and, what is considered as purely infantile behavior, has a lot to do with this metadiscursive dimension in attitudes against play and in favor for hobbying. In the end, to engage with a toy clearly represents very much a play(ful) activity to me. Perhaps then, hobbying with something should be accepted as ‘playing with something’ and in the case of playthings, ‘toying with something’.



The rocking horse and other horse-themed toys from then 'til now. Works of art as displayed in the Of Toys and Men exhibition showcased at Helsinki Tennis Palace Museum, spring 2012.



Detail from previous photograph showing how the horse as a plaything has evolved from a wooden toy into a plastic character of fantasy.

From early learning devices to tools of creativity

A plaything aims to please and activate the player by various affordances related to its use. At the same time, however, toys are, paradoxically enough, things that the player ultimately manipulates as s/he pleases. I have been marshalling evidence here that the play patterns in relation to adult activities with toys are multifaceted and numerous. By looking at these activities, I have suggested that the attitudes towards adult toy play should be developed into more positive directions, as contemporary toys afford a multitude of suggestions on how to enjoy them through ludic engagement.

Traditionally, and particularly when children are concerned, toys are often regarded, designed and marketed with educational and thus developmental benefits in mind. Therefore, toys are seen as tools for learning that enhance the skill-building and socialization of the child. Naturally, different toys afford different possibilities for learning. In the case of dolls, action figures and soft toys, they can promote various possibilities to learn about subjects such as emotional attachment, ways of physical manipulation, imaginative play, etc. I have suggested that these toys should be seen to also afford adult play. Seen in this way, and as the findings of this thesis prove, adults learn through and from toys through creative and productive playing patterns. These are not limited only to caring for the toy, but also sharing of the toy with like-minded players. Sometimes this happens even in the context of art.



Examples of contemporary toys with DIY dimensions, 2012.

Therefore, toys not only represent themselves as commercial, escapist or fantastic artefacts. The potentiality to communicate 'serious' dimensions of contemporary culture, such as ideas about society, invites artists to use toys either as inspirational or as raw material in their works. As Dormer points out, 'the creative possibilities are played with or against a common collection of rules, and also because these rules can be used and played with' (Dormer, 1997, 171). What 'toying with art', or rather, making art with toys ultimately is, putting the toy design through a test which will show, whether or not contemporary toys allow to be toyed with – or even played with against the rules – in the name of art. Usually they do.

Jenkins claims that media producers, who 'operate within the old logic of the commodity culture' fannish activities represent a potential threat to their immaterial property (2006, 146). In the realm of toys and especially character toys, the risk is evidently present. I have argued that the players with their creative and sometimes subversive (divergent) play activities are beyond the control of the toy inventor, the designer, the toy company, perhaps even in more than the many other areas of material, consumer and

entertainment culture. At its best, play may be both a means for individualization and socialization, but also an activity that has its own ends (Karkama, 1981, 21). In the end, the actualization of playful potential is always in the hands of the user. Nevertheless, the work of the toy designer is to attract the player towards the toy by giving clues about its affordances, however subtle they may be. Depending on the nature of these affordances, the player will decide how to actualize the playful potential of the toy.

As I have explored in this thesis, toys in the adult world come to carry a multitude of meanings and functions that are beyond the educational value that is often considered an important element when discussing children's toys. In other words, in the light of my study, toys can be understood to be artefacts that stretch from early learning devices into tools for creativity. Following this idea, one suggestion for further research would then be, that future design work also concerning character toys would aim at broadly-based affordances proposing creative play acts with the toy.

From designer creations to characters of (identity) construction

The main findings of the study are thus that adults do play with toys in manifold ways. They are as creative and productive as children in their play patterns and refuse to limit themselves to only what the toy suggests in terms of its original affordances, as proposed by the designers and the toy company. Toys in adult play are both aesthetic, decorative artefacts appreciated and displayed in intimate home environments, they are silent partners or companions that allow conversations between the player and the toy, they are both material and inspirational sources (even a medium) for artists, and to the 'everyday' players they represent a platform that affords creative play and socialization. In toy play, adults are first discovering the affordances of the toy, then actualizing its possible potentiality and finally, function as a co-agent with the toy in producing creative acts of play.

The events taking place in digital play spaces come to depict how adults approach, bond with and manipulate contemporary playthings and the stories related to them. Photographic play seems to be one of the most popular activities in new media, but functions of e.g. doll fans such as collecting, customizing, crafting (and tutoring thereof) and other forms of creative play, communication and channelling sales exemplify forms of playful behaviour.

I have thus argued that this development means that a growing number of adults has discovered toys as recreational objects, but also as tools for learning which enhance creativity and expand the toy 'hobby' also into the before mentioned areas of crafts, creative production and social play. Additionally, I have argued that players come to have an effect on other adults:

Through their activities, they seem to attract other potential players to toy with contemporary playthings. This occurs mainly on the playgrounds of social media that allows, for example the sharing of photoplay and other fanciful activities of adult toy players.

Through the construction of representations of toys, players have also come to use the toy for avatars purposes. This means that the plaything becomes a representative for the player. Therefore, I am drawn to the conclusion that the toy in play, also develops from a designerly creation into a tool for identity construction. Based on these findings, I am arriving at a conclusion that toys are much more than mere gadgets to be used in leisurely consumption (although their importance in this field is hard to deny either). They allow the adult player to develop an understanding of him/herself and of the world. I would then like to return to the discussion about children and toys vs. adults and toys, and to point out how it is possible, in the light of my findings, to see certain differences between the contemporary cultures of play between children and adults. One may ask: Do the activities of the profiled 'players' really have to be understood as toy play acts connected with adulthood and not as something that represent play at all ages?

First, what seems to separate toy play, when comparing children and adults, is the documentation of the play acts and more significantly, the active sharing of them that happens in the realm of social media. Adults have greater possibilities to express themselves online and carry out actions in relation to their toy fandom.

Second, as the results of my study seem to suggest, adult toy play, as interpreted especially in the framework of photoplay, is that while children fantasize about and play out adult activities in their play with character toys which may well represent something that happens to them later in life, adults create such fantastic scenarios in their play acts that are only realizable through toy play and most probably out of reach of normal life.

It is possible that children are not as conscious (and thus ambitious) as adults in their activities with toys, as adults see the performative side of toy play as an integral part of the process. The performances carried out by adult toy players may be viewed from many angles. One of them being the toy designer's viewpoint. Second is the viewpoint of the artist, who performs in producing a work of art that has either its inspirational or material beginnings in the plaything. And lastly, as in the context of this study, there is the viewpoint of the 'everyday' adult toy player, who performs play acts with the toy and finally in many cases shares the results of these acts with a like-minded audience.

While child's play (also in the company of toys) is regarded to have instrumental value in the name of developmental benefits, adult toy play is seen mostly as a form of entertainment.

"CHILD'S PLAY"

play as 'work'
developmental toys
programmed play
seriousness
utilitarian
=
controlled learning and amusement

(unintended/natural)
KNOW-HOW

"NO CHILD'S PLAY"

play as entertainment
creative toys
free play
pleasure
non-utilitarian
=
user-generated learning and amusement

(intentional)
WOW, FLOW, GLOW

Differences in attitudes towards toy play between children and adults.

In other words, while the toy play of children is considered to be work, this does not apply to adults who are expected to engage ludically with toys outside the sphere of work. This, however, is changing as companies are coming to a more deep understanding of the benefits of (toy) play.

Adults design the play world of children in terms of toys, but get to decide themselves about the toys they want to play with in other words, where, how and with whom these playthings are manipulated. The toy play of children is much more controlled than the one of adults. The utilitarian aspect of toys in the realm of children's play culture gives toys as seen from this perspective (somewhat surprisingly) a rather serious impression.

The toy hobby of adults is far from children's play (Virtanen 2012, 62).

Furthermore, adult toy play is 'no child's play', as many of the players themselves and the popular rhetoric as communicated through contemporary journalism, often seem to stress. Yet adults are showing a versatile and multifaceted array of outcomes of their toy play, not very much unlike the outcomes of children's toy play. The difference in these cultures is mostly that adults often document their play for their own enjoyment and for the others. When shared, these documentations become 'invitations to play', sometimes even activities that resemble the nature of games.



Peek, 2012

Lastly, children's toy play is carried out just because of the enjoyment of the process – for the players it is play for its own sake. Behind this seemingly innocent logic, lies a hidden agenda striving to build a know-how of the child. Although adults enjoy their toy play also from the perspective of a flowing process, their toy play comes to have many meanings above and beyond this.

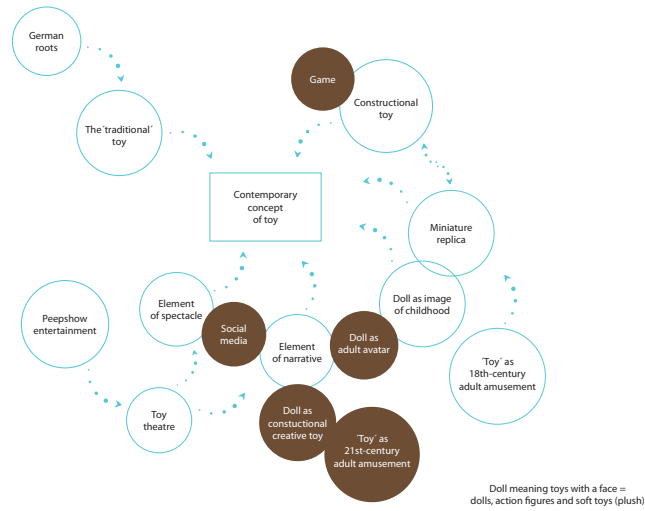
From caring to sharing

Toys are adopted, collected and cherished, aesthetically valued – even anthropomorphized to the degree that they have in some cases come to represent substitutes for pet animals and family members for their owners. Homo *ludens*, the playing human, is, when playing also homo *narrans*, the storytelling human. Thus, when playing, the players also tell stories to themselves (Kalliala, 1999, 62; orig. Geertz, Clifford (1973, 1994) *The Interpretations of Cultures*, Fontana Press, London, 1st ed, 448). The toy user lives through the experience, is the interpreter of the toy story, one who rewrites the narrative and connects with the toy object on an emotional level.

This study thus challenges the theoretical standpoint according to which playing with toys first and foremost means solitary play by pointing out adults as active and social players, whose playful behaviour, especially seen in social media, results in the development of different skills and forms of self-expression and also toying with the ideas of the players' own identity. Toy characters have, in fact, become such a platform for creative expression, identity construction and storytelling that I would like to extend the concept of the contemporary doll towards the direction of constructional toys. Dolls, action figures and soft toys are in the 21st century a medium that provides adult amusement, but they are more than that – they are our avatars in ludic activities where the former notions of toys, games and play blend into each other in a hybrid manner.

So what does this all mean in terms of toys as designed artefacts now and in the future? In my view what designers could benefit from is considering the following: The evolution of person-product, or in this case, player-toy relationships that have evolved from the traditional and intimate caring of toys to a more publicly *shared* relationships, where toys function not only as intrapersonal containers of memories, but as interpersonal connecting devices. Our conceptual view of the contemporary toy needs according to my idea, be adjusted (see graph on the following page).

As world's population age, adults emerge as a demographic worth taking seriously and it is important to recognise that toys are not just for children. Toy manufacturers need to acknowledge this by expanding and tailoring product offerings and marketing activities accordingly (Utku, 2013).



My development of Dan Fleming's graph. The contemporary toy re-interpreted.



Leon, 2012



Mint I, 2012

Chapter 12: Final fantasy: The future of adult toy play

In play, we explore possible pathways into the future.

- Henricks (2008, 174)

If you can design a toy... you can design anything...maybe?

- Toy designer Sato Hisao (2011)

This study provides several opportunities and ideas for further research work. In the concluding chapter, I will present theoretical and pragmatic considerations in relation to my topic of research. I will suggest ideas on the one hand, for further research and on the other, practical implications that can be considered especially in the context of toy design and furthermore, among commercial providers of playthings.

In his book *Sustainable by Design. Explorations in theory and practice* published in 2006, Stuart Walker writes:

Imagine an object that is used today by rich and poor, young and old, healthy and sick; an object that fulfils a prosaic, utilitarian role, and has a deeply spiritual significance; that can be decorative and highly aesthetic; and has its owner a profoundly personal value that is inherent to that particular object, independent of price, quality and materials. Imagine too, that such an object has a wide variety of designs and manifestations, that it can be mass-produced for a few pennies or, for a similar cost, made at home. Perhaps the contemplation of such an object would allow us to see anew some of the failings of our contemporary, rather limited approaches to product design and production, and offer some pointers for a more sustainable and more inclusive future (Walker, 2006, 44).

The vignette above points to an object that is already well-known and spread across the globe: prayer beads. But does pondering on the passage from Walker's book not ring a bell when considering the theme of the thesis at hand as well? In my thinking, toys in contemporary cultures are very much artefacts used by the rich and poor, the healthy and sick. As either mass-produced or hand-made objects they fulfil their utilitarian role in the course of play and may possess deep spiritual significance as objects that allow dialogue with the self. They may be used for decorative purposes and are thus regarded to have highly regarded aesthetic value. Again, they can have deep significance for their owners as companions, muses and play partners.

One can envisage a future, however, in which our main interest in both science and design will lie in what they teach us about the world [...]. Design like science is a tool for understanding as well as for acting (Simon, 1996, 164).

As an toy industry practitioner myself, I have, through this study, gained a new understanding of toys as artefacts that may in many ways be designed in order to promote various forms of ludic engagement. On a personal level, the research has thus contributed to my knowledge base in the way that Schön describes; as the implementation is in a way already built into the research process of reflective research in which ‘practitioners will gain and use insights derived from it as they participate in it’ (Schön, 1983, 324).

In this thesis, we have learned much about toy play both on a theoretical and an empirical level – yet there remains plenty of challenges for researchers in the future. I have just scratched the surface of the phenomenon of adult toy play, but wish that what I have done in the context of the thesis has inspired the reader become interested in future paths of knowledge with a playful attitude in mind. The final chapter discusses the implications of the study and reflects upon some suggestions for future research.

In the following, I will touch upon my thoughts concerning why an improved understanding of adult toy play and the various cultures it manifests in is needed. Furthermore, I will suggest ideas for how the findings of this thesis might contribute to toy design and toy retail of tomorrow so that players of all ages would be more equally served both in design and the market place.

Theoretical considerations: Improved understanding of adult play cultures

There will be a rhetoric of ludicism in the future, Brian Sutton-Smith predicted in his *Ambiguity of Play*, published in 1997 (149). In year 2013, play seems to have gained a more visible and somewhat more valued significance in culture. Although toys are very much present in our everyday world, they are in my thinking, somewhat undervalued as compared to attitudes on play on a more general level.

As Mouritsen has noted, toys need children (1999, 71). To limit toys only to the sphere of childhood play, would be an incorrect assessment. As the study reported in this thesis argues, toys are an important material epitome of contemporary adult experience in not only the realm of toy design, but also the context of their users – in the multidimensional playgrounds of art and creative play. Taking a critical stance to the data used in this research demands an understanding of my sample as only a fragmentary entity of

documentation of adult toy play that is rooted mostly in the playgrounds of western societies.

Furthermore, the toy playing adults in most of the data tells the tale of a privileged individual, who has both economical means to acquire often expensive playthings and perhaps more importantly, has the (leisure) time at his or her disposal. Additionally, this player is well connected with fellow players through technologies and informed about various online applications that constitute the playgrounds of adult toy players. One suggestion for taking the study further would then be to look outside of what here is understood here as ‘the western’ and investigate attitudes and practices of toy play in other parts of the world.

Seen from a Finnish perspective of the 1990s, play research seems to have come to a halt, says Soini (1991, 12). One of the major reasons for this is that research on play has (had) to compete with other, more serious subjects of study. Thus, according to Soini, studies on play seem to be a research subject ‘on the side’ that one may have focused on for a while but then moved on to more serious themes. This is exactly the case when examining the discourse around adult toy play in the 2010s – it is regarded as something that is discussed only under the topic of hobbying and as such a nondescript phenomenon worth mentioning only in the margins of texts. There are not many toy researchers in the world. At the same time, for example in journalism, there seems to be a growing interest in what adults are doing in the company of toys. Nevertheless, although the activity of adult toy play has gained more interest in everyday journalism, it is still persistently discussed under the topic of hobbying.

It is because of this somewhat static and under-developed rhetoric of play that I would wish to see the phenomenon explored further in the future, in theoretical research by asking for example: How have the understandings of play developed in language and (western) thought? And, at what stage has playing with toys become a hobby and thus something that is discussed without a mention of the word play – or rather, constantly denying the possibility of play, although ludic engagement with toys, among other things, also is that?

Besides pondering on semiotics, I would also like to see future studies in adult toy play to conduct more thorough research on how the supposed infantilization of culture, as mainly debated in sociology, connects with toy play.

Further, referring back to Yoav Ziv’s notion of a ‘second childhood’ that gives a toy designer a new perspective on considering toys as played artefacts, what would be of interest is to know if the toy player who does not have children of his/her own, is in a state of a ‘continuous childhood’, representing thus a (positive) case of the much debated ‘Peter Pan syndrome’.

Moreover, questions that remain open and would thus need further assessment are, for example whether or not toy play activities of adults are different in case the player has children of his/her own, or if the play patterns change when a toy playing adult formerly without a child starts a family of his/her own and start to play with their children and perhaps new types of toys. (The interviewees were not specifically asked about their family situation and I could not reflect upon this question myself although some informants clearly pointed to play activities of children that they have observed).

I have only briefly touched on the subject of the continued childhood here, but consider it an important area of study, since what ideas in connection with this development seem to suggest, is that it is a thoroughly negative development, a threat to our culture.

My concern, I should emphasize, is that toy play continues to be viewed as a marginal, eternally and entirely child-related phenomenon alongside other forms of play such as the much hyped and to some degree more media-sexy realm of gaming. Seen from a Finnish perspective, digital games are a highly praised area of the creative industry, and as such probably deserve the attention they get. Seen from a more international angle, however, the industries and cultures of play are a much wider phenomenon that should not be limited in terms of academic research, nor design, to the area of (digital) games. Tony Blackshaw writes about leisure time and suggests, that instead of spending our time on McDonaldization, IKEAization of culture – consumption etc. what we should be doing instead is finding some ‘new rules of leisure’ [finding some new ways of making our leisure more meaningful] (Blackshaw, 2010, 149). I interpret this in a way that people should spend more time playing with their exciting toys *and* each other instead of continuously acquiring of new things. For if we stop playing, says Stuart Brown, we share the fate of animals that grow out of play. Our behaviour becomes fixed (Brown, 2009, 71).

Play can be all of these: neither inherently useful nor useless, neither good nor evil. Play is – play endures – play may be something that creates a spark, lighting a candle where there was darkness (Burghardt, 2005, 405).

Overall, what I feel is needed in the future is a strengthening of this spark that I may have, to some degree, accomplished to create by writing this thesis; an improved and holistic understanding of adult toy play and its effects on different areas of culture. I hope that by conducting this study and reporting the findings on my explorations in the many dimensions of adult engagement with toys has contributed to understanding of this phenomenon. From the beginning, it has been clear to me that I want, first and foremost, to honour my own profession, the one of designers responsible for designing products that enable play.

I have decided to do this by writing about ideas in reference to toy design and more importantly, to how the potentiality of this design work is actualized by adult toy players in contemporary realms of culture. I realize that while many designers do value theoretical knowledge, many of them value suggestions for pragmatic applications even more. Therefore, in the following, I will attempt to gather some thoughts that may be useful for future toy design.

Pragmatic considerations: Designing for tomorrow

Here's the real truth at the core of our fascination with toys. It's about dreams and the desire to catch them in a piece of plastic (Phoenix, 2006, 103).

The study conducted here has aimed to benefit the field of design. In the remainder this final chapter of the thesis, I address the implications for future toy design and marketing. Yuli Tamir, principal at Shenkar College of Design asked at the toy design conference in 2011: When we are designing toys, are we designing for pleasure or for learning? (*From Rags to Apps Conference*, Shenkar College Tel Aviv 10.11.2011, the author's notes). Leaning on the findings of this thesis, I would say both. Toys must be designed to be pleasurable in their aesthetics and mechanics, and even their storytelling and they need to cater for the imagination and creative manipulation for all ages as well. In other words, toy design should be both about generating pleasures, experiences of discovery and as result, some learning too.

Each craft involves connoisseurship, and connoisseurship is a part of tacit knowledge – that is, it is learned through experience (Dormer, 1997, 225). If adult toy play is to be considered a kind of a craft where toys are manipulated and by that, constantly reinvented in terms of their visuality and narrativity, then Peter Dormer's statement of connoisseurship holds true even for designing and playing with toys. To truly understand play with toys, we have to engage with these artefacts and in order to understand other players, we need to open ourselves to playful dialogue either online or offline. For toy play, as I have illustrated here, can happen either solitarily or in a group. In order for adult toy play to be viewed as a definite dimension of contemporary culture, it seems that this phenomenon has to be addressed by the volume of players instead of the inherent qualities of play activities that adults take part in. Designers may have a role in luring the adult players to leave their toy closets and enter the public sphere.



Monster High Create-A-Monster dolls from Mattel. These doll products illustrate a case of trickle-up; how the DIY doll trend has spread from the subcultures to the masses, 2012.



Monster High soft doll characters feature elements familiar from hand-made toys such as buttons.

In my reading on play, I have become convinced that toy play needs to be explored from the perspectives of tactility, operability and reflectivity. Without actual manipulation, toys lose their purpose and become something they were not intended to be: festive and silent objects that inhabit dusty cabinets, buried alive and doomed to oblivion. Without imaginative play and silent dialogues with it, the relationship with the toy will be lost and the toy story broken. So toy designers need to understand that in the toy one has to design affordances for both the visceral, operational and the reflective levels. On the operational level, the toy needs to allow moving of limbs, facial features such as changing eyes, or a turning head. The toy character needs to stand up on its legs. The player should be able to dress the toy, to play with the toy, to accessorize and depict it in multiple ways. However, these affordances for different types of play should be cleverly designed in a way that there is room for the player to discover the possibilities of manipulation by him/herself. Moreover, the toy should offer continuous pleasure and hence become something that is sustainable – in other words, valued on long term.

KH: What kind of toys would you design if anything was possible?

Interviewee: Something that allows children of different ages to play together, outside on the street that parents could join in. This is of course idealistic. (TD/ss)

Daniel Miller notes that ‘material culture matters because objects create subjects much more than the other way around. It is the order of the relationship to objects and

between objects that creates people through socialization’ (Miller, 2008, 287). So we can say that toys, in a way, create the player. On the other hand, in the flow of play, the player actualizes the toy and may contribute to how the toy attains that certain glow. Also, as we have seen in this thesis, toys are communicative artefacts that encourage to communication with like-minded people; they who have the same toy and same kind of play patterns in connection with that toy.

In the play culture of today, a significant group of toys already afford the idea of sharing and social play. As I have explained, this connects with the narrative of the toy, either in connection with the original back story, but also in reference to the toy stories that the players create themselves. This does not only mean a verbal storyness that may be connected with the toy by the player, but most of all the possibility to continue the story of the toy visually, by altering its appearance and as we have seen, by photographing it in different locations. The idea of sharing a toy experience is, in the times of the ludic turn and the one of social media, a central one. Therefore, the answer of one of my interviewees as quoted above is not necessarily only idealistic. Maybe there can be toys that cross the possible limits between the play cultures of children and adults. (Maybe there already are).

The conclusions for practical applications are thus that designers need to consider possible ways of the player who will manipulate the toy in various ways in play. Often, as stressed in this thesis, the player will ultimately decide how to play with the toy. But as we have noted, the designer may still design suggestions, even subtle ones, in order to enhance the potentiality of the toy.

A company called Desktop Manufacture currently sells a 3D printer (or rapid manufacturing system) for \$5 000. In a couple of years, these machines, as Sheenan and Andrews predict, will appear on high streets and people will send them plans for making pretty much any single-material items... including toys (2009, 95). I am sure that subcultures on the margins are always reinventing themselves, but it is hard for me to see now that the masses would all of a sudden start to print out their own toys. As discovered earlier, mass-produced toys do not lose their aura because of reproduction, but maintain it exactly because of that. Therefore, toys that come in volumes are still needed. What the designers should pay attention to, however, is to ensure that even mass-produced toys enable customization and personalization (and repairation!). ‘To play is to take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently build it anew’, says Henricks (2006, 185). To play with toys of the future could share the same idea; to play with the toys of the future could mean then the affordance of taking them apart in one way or another and to build them up again.

'A reported 3% year-on-year increase, the future for construction toys remains bright for it in hard economic times', the *Toys'n'Playthings* magazine reports. Alex Kovacevic, Brandmanager of Goldfish & Bison says; "The very nature of construction also makes it one of the few categories in the toy industry that can be truly universal" (*Toys'n'Playthings*, June 2012, Vol. 31, Nr, 9, 26). In connection with this thesis I would like to suggest that the toy designers designing dolls, action figures and soft toys could pay attention to this trend in particular: It seems that the category of construction toys affords many kinds of play potential that could inspire future character oriented toy design.¹⁷⁶

Future of toy retail

...is it possible to conceive toys that [...] bring people together regardless of age, educating and amusing at the same time? (Pauli & Colombo, 2005).

Besides toy design itself, we need to briefly address the future of toy retail as a site for pragmatic implications in the context of the ideas that this thesis brings forward. Adults sticking to, or returning to, activities traditionally connected with childhood, in other words forms of toy play, are surprisingly often labelled merely collectors and fans that are of marginal interest to toy companies. This occurs even though collecting is acknowledged as a form of play in itself – an activity that is addressed as an important part of the toy play of children and taken into consideration by many toy companies (i.e. Mattel with the 'Gillette razor blade' strategy first introduced with the launch of the Barbie doll, meaning that the collectible accessories are at the core of the business, not the doll). Adults as the collectors but also the 'superfans' and much more of toys, are neither to be neglected as they represent a growing audience for all kinds of play(ful) experiences.

¹⁷⁶ Two examples illustrate the continuing interest on construction toys well: The Lego Architecture series that is clearly targeted at adults (see <http://architecture.lego.com/>) and the WDC Helsinki Made of Wood (miniature set of famous Helsinki buildings launched in 2012 and designed by Kokoro & Moi, see <http://www.finnishdesignshop.fi/sisustus-muut-sisustustuotteet-helsinki-made-wood-palikkasarja-p-6097.html>). Lego Architecture bares a conceptual resemblance to the Domus Kits (2008) designed by Brugel Architectes & Enginieres and Domus Kits, see <http://www.domuskits.com/en/index.php>.

The toy industry could benefit from recognizing this development pattern that is also referred to as ASYL, meaning 'Adults Staying Younger' as a counter-trend to the well-known and identified development especially among people working in the toy industry, KGOY, that is 'Kids Growing Older Younger' adults who are staying younger longer and maybe thus more playful in their behaviour, and who could be seen as potential new target audiences for toys.

First, the retailer must have attractive toys in their store, in order to get the customers in. Also as Vorderer and Chan note, people can enhance play by creating environments that elicit play behaviours (2006, 354). The most innovative toy shops have e.g. added interactive elements and art galleries to their spaces.

Adventurism, child-centeredness and optimism are things that the owners of toy shops should address more in the future. (TR/mrl)

In reference to a study of tweens, Markus Xyländer suggests: 'If retailers are familiar with and cater for the codes and styles of young people, they can, via their visual merchandising, turn their brands and products into something that can be experienced at the point of sale and thereby persuade young people to become customers whose loyalty they will retain long-term' (*Toys 4 Teens* leaflet 2012, 15). As Janet Simon from company Alex Toys sees it, 'speciality retailers will need to provide more than just one place to shop; they need to become a *destination* for many reasons' (Lombardi, 2013, 48–56, accentuation mine). An example from the retail sector already shows signs of understanding the importance of this:

Playlounge is a very big sidestep from the conventional concept of a toy shop, challenging the notion that toys are just for kids. Our aim is to create a space where design, art and illustration fuse with toy culture, providing an environment where everyone can play – regardless of age or gender.

This will be a space where adults can buy toys for themselves, but that's not to say kids won't get a look-in! Little people are just as important as the big people and we will have an equally diverse range of products specially suited to them, creating a retail space where all can have fun.

This will be a lounge where everybody can play. (Play Lounge advertisement in Hi*Fructose, *Toysploitation Magazine*. Premiere Issue, Summer 2005. Also see www.playlounge.co.uk)

Secondly, besides making the retail space attractive for transgenerational representatives of toy players, what the industry should explore more in the future, is its understandings of play as a broader topic and phenomenon. Currently, digital and physical playthings – may they be toys, games or hybrids of these – are in most cases sold in different departments if we consider the offline points of sale. What if the industries of more traditional toys and on the other hand, the digital ‘things’ for play could come together in the retail sector in the name of selling the *experience of play* instead of strictly categorized products for entertainment? The decision to improve the structure of the retail sector remains a task for the industry professionals. By allowing a broader understanding of play, perhaps we could improve our thinking of how to sell future products created by the *industries of play* to the ever-growing audience of players of all ages.







I will conclude this chapter and the thesis by asking: What is the role of toys in future play? According to a presentation made by toy researcher Jeffrey Goldstein in 2009 one answer lies in that the role of toys continues to stimulate and sustain play, helping children, adults and families to benefit from the many ways in which play improves one’s quality of life (*Toys, Play and Human Development*, 2009). Toy designers have an important task in suggesting new ways of improving our lives through ludic engagement with toys. Design is thus not mere problem-solving. It needs to invent futures, says Krippendorff (2010). What can ultimately be changed and altered – this is a designer’s task.

Through play, toys greatly influence the contributions each of us will make to the world as adults. As adults, we change the world.

- Bruce Lund, toy inventor and founder of Lund and Company, L.L.C.

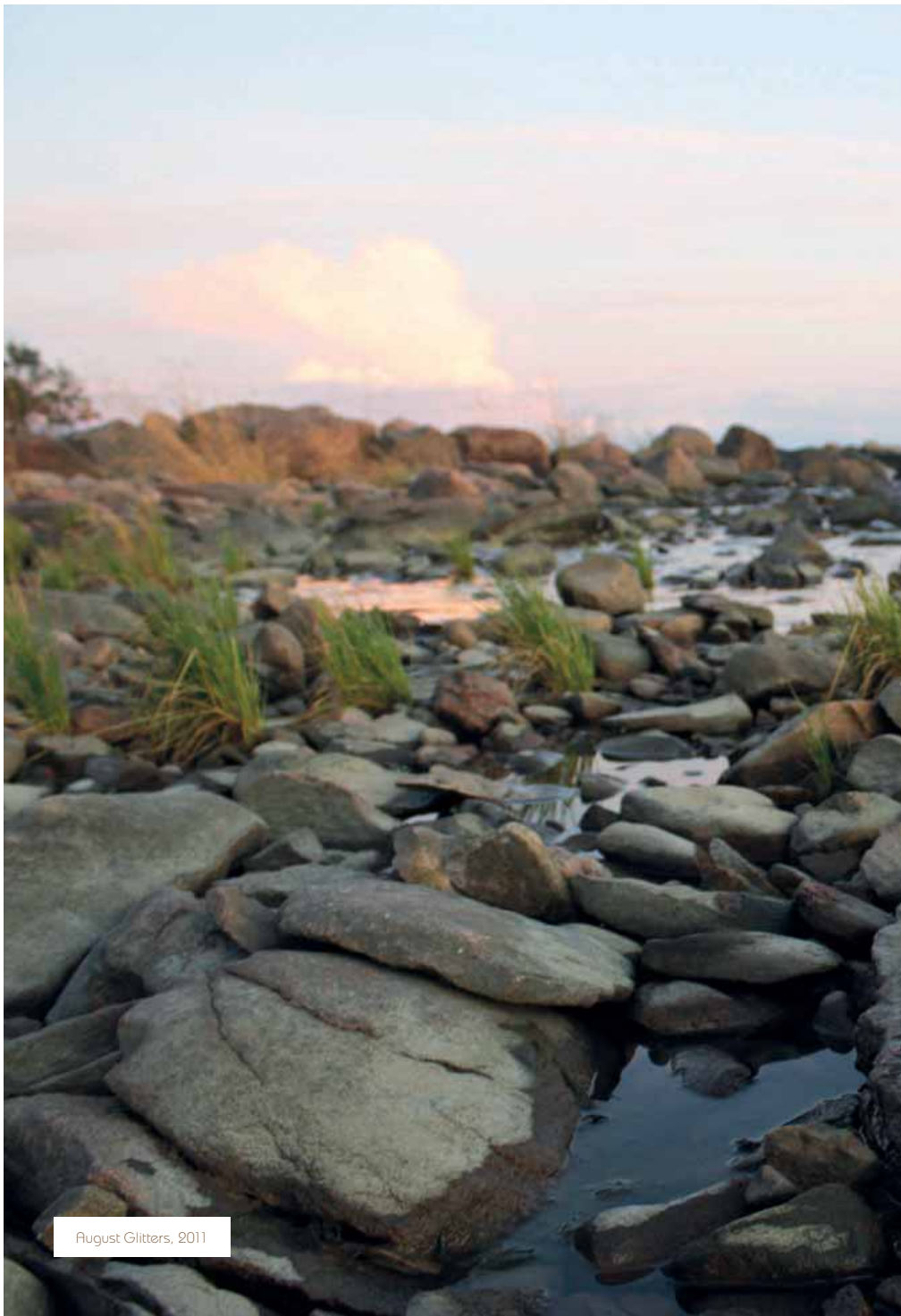
Adults unite! Join the crusade. We deserve the right to play with toys, games and puzzles – just as much – perhaps even more – than children. Our Christmas gifts and birthday presents should not be limited to clothing, appliances, and mundane utilitarian objects. Demand toys. Do not suppress the child within. Let it surface (Rinker, 1991, 1).

Manifest for adult toy play

-  The benefits of play are universally acknowledged, so should the benefits of interaction with playthings be.
-  Aspects of the existence of adult play are verified through inspection of art, design and ‘everyday’ play.
-  Research shows that adults are actively interacting with toys through different forms of play.
-  The benefits of adult toy play should thus be acknowledged and studied in a more determined way in toy and play research.
-  Adults should be able to approach, acquire, manipulate and share experiences of playthings in work and during leisure time without feelings of guilt.
-  Inspection of adult toy play may help designers to understand the concept of play(fulness) better and to use this knowledge in design in a broader context.



Autoplay at the *This is Play* exhibition, Galleria Elise, Pori 2011





Leaving Circus for Holiday, 2010

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Interview with Stevanne Aurbach / "Dr.Toy" (DrT).

The interviews were conducted in years 2008–2009. The interviews were made in Finnish and English, taped, transcribed and translated by the author. The original documents are in the possession of the author.

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Appendices

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS USED IN THE STUDY: Appendices 1 and 2.

For interviews with toy designers, toy users (artists' toying, everyday players) and toy researchers.

There are two semi-structured forms: One for the toy designers with a position in the toy industry i.e. the 'toy makers' and a second one for the end-users and researchers of toys; the 'toying' artists and 'everyday players' – the ones that manipulate or examine the toys through various forms of interaction.

The purpose of the forms was to function as a thematic list and to ensure that the relevant questions were presented. The form for toy designers is the most comprehensive. The topics of the questions in this form concern the work of the toy designer and experience in relation to toys. The form for the toy users is more limited focusing mainly on the use of and experience with toys.

I conducted these interviews (altogether 40) during 2008–2011 in Finland, U.S.A, Hong Kong, Germany and Holland. All research data collected (transcribed, partly photographed/audio- and video-taped) is in the author's possession. The excerpts of the interviews used in the thesis are authentic, although in some cases translated from Finnish to English.

Appendix 1

INTERVIEW FORM FOR TOY DESIGNERS

(TD, 8 interviews)

Interviewer: Author, KH

Interviewee: (personal data that will not be published; name, occupation position in the industry (i.e. toy company employee, independent designer, entrepreneur, agent)

QUESTIONS

THE WORK OF THE TOY DESIGNER

1. How did You become a toy designer?

2. Did You have any expectations about the work of the toy designer before starting your career?
3. What kind of a career do You have as a toy designer?
4. Tell me about Your work as a toy designer: What do You do/job description?
5. What kind of a designer do You consider yourself i.e. artist, industrial designer, inventor or other industry expert in the area of toy design?
6. How do You find ideas for a new toy?
7. Which parts of the design process are particularly important?
8. Do You follow a certain design routine?
9. Who do You design for?
10. How do You get ideas? How do you seek inspiration to your designs?

PRINCIPLES OF TOY DESIGN

11. Are there any personal principles for Your toy design?
12. What do You take into consideration when You start to design a toy?
13. What kind of toys would You design if anything was possible?
14. What do You think that designers should take into consideration when designing playthings for adults?

EXPERIENCE OF TOYS

15. How do You define an "experience"?
16. What does a good/memorable experience consist of?
17. What kind of experiences are toys related with?
18. What constitutes WOW in a toy?
19. What constitutes play value in a toy?
20. Do You use the assumed experience of the toy user as a design principle?
21. What would the ideal toy experience be like?
22. What is expected from the designer when designing a memorable experience related to toys?

ADULT USE OF TOYS

23. In which ways do adults use toys?
24. Does this differ from children's use of toys? How?

Appendix 2

INTERVIEW FORM FOR TOY USERS

(ARTISTS TOYING; AT, 7 interviews, 'EVERYDAY' TOY PLAYERS; TP and ADULT TOY DAY; ATD, 21 interviews, TOY RESEARCHERS; TR, 3 interviews and DR. TOY; DIT 1 interview)

Interviewer: Author, KH

Interviewee: (personal data that will not be published)

QUESTIONS

ADULT USE OF TOYS

1. In which ways do adults use toys?
2. How do You use toys?
3. Where do You keep your toys?
4. When do You take them out?
5. Does this differ from children's use of toys? How?
6. What kind of toys do You have?
7. Can You show me (any of) them?
8. What makes You interested in these particular objects?

EXPERIENCE OF TOYS

9. How do you define an "experience"?
10. What does a good/memorable experience consist of?
11. What kind of experiences can toys create?
12. What would an ideal toy experience be like?





NOTES

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What comes next...





This thesis provides new ways of approaching adult play. It suggests that in the time of the ludic turn as discussed by Brian Sutton-Smith, adults are showing increased enthusiasm towards toys. The study examines how interest towards toys turns into playful and productive activities at adult age, through actual manipulation of three types of contemporary playthings: dolls, soft toys and action figures. The thesis is connected to larger developments not only in material and visual culture, but also in social media and digital play culture. Adult relationships with toys that manifest both materially and digitally are examined from the perspectives of art, toy design and productive play through three topics: toys, their industry and designers (wow), play, performers and playgrounds (flow), toy player profiles and play practices (glow).

The thesis takes the reader on a journey through the multidisciplinary playgrounds of adult toy play and seeks a deeper understanding of the multidimensional phenomenon of adult play that happens with contemporary toys. It makes an attempt to understand how adults approach, bond with and actively interact with toys.

By investigating the multilayered phenomenon, the study at hand opens up novel views on adult toy play practices. By doing so, it contributes to the discipline of (toy) design by offering food for thought both for future design work and further toy research.



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