

Fantastic Relationships

Adult bonding with designed dolls

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Abstract: Designer dolls often tell a story. When a designer doll becomes someone's possession, its owner continues the narrative in one way or another. The doll may become a part of interior decoration, the next addition to a collection of toys or the owner might actually *play* with it in a more traditional sense of the term by creating visual scenarios. This paper aims to reflect on current designer doll trends, the formation of fantastic relationships between adult players and dolls, and to clarify the different ways in which the adult owner of a designed toy object of this kind continues its visual narrative, for example as shown in the Internet based *flickr* photo management application. The objective is to inform toy designers about the ways the players bond emotionally with the objects and how toy experiences are created through fantastic relationships with designer dolls.

Keywords: *Play, Toy, Designer Toy, Storytelling, Fantastic*

1. Digging in the Toy Box: Definitions and Objectives

A *toy* is an object designed for playing purposes for a child, adult or an animal regardless of age or gender. As a child I was especially intrigued by wonderful toy objects, such as *Fabuland* lego sets, *Barbie dolls*, *My Little Ponies*. I wished to receive these toy characters as gifts, to add new items on to my ever expanding toy universe. I remember not to have played so much with these toys in the traditional way, pretending them to have a life of their own or thinking of them as my friends. I would rather function as a set designer who organized the toys in aesthetic, spatial situations – and admired endlessly the results of these arrangements. I remember the frustration of the playmates when I asked them not to interfere with these imaginative scenarios. Or was this still play in its truest meaning after all? Thinking back it might just have been a form of *play* anyway. To play with toy objects is to interact with things - a way of interacting that creates experiences.

Later, I learned that what children take from their experiences with toys is not the memory of a toy itself, but the reminiscence of individual play experiences, the stories, called up through their interaction with toys (Ellis, 2005, pp. 48-50).

Toys are products for the leisure time and seen from a wider perspective, objects of visual culture. New toy products are born as a result of creative thinking. In the wealthier parts of the world mass-produced toys are an unavoidable and indispensable part of the material world (Ruckenstein, 2008, p. 87).

This paper functions as a prelude for a research project focusing on dolls as designed objects and the dimensions of play that these toys encourage. The interest lies in the experiences that dolls may generate when people interact with them. I am limiting my study on doll characters of two kinds: the hyper-real and the fantastic.

As Sutton-Smith points out, play in the modern world has come to mean playing with things more than playing with others. In this study, the goal of my thesis is to prove that play is becoming more social again as the experiences of toy objects (such as dolls) are shared through new media. Sharing the toy experience with others increases the pleasure of the activity. This idea is valid in the light of the suggestion of Linderoth, Lindström and Alexandersson, who propose that communication plays a central role in the construction of experience, *that it does not just represent experience, as widely perceived, rather, it more importantly constitutes experience* (Linderoth, Lindström and Alexandersson, 2004).

2. Play as Experience

Play is an activity that is carried out either alone or in the company of others, something that demands imaginative thinking and creates meaning and pleasure.¹ It is an activity that is carried out in all age groups either with or without a toy object. Garvey characterizes play as spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and without extrinsic goals (Garvey, 1993). The proper function of play is never to develop capacities (Caillois, 2001).

It is not necessary to find a reason to justify play, Fabregat, Costa and Romero agree. Playing is positive in itself, independently of the end to which it contributes. Play stimulates curiosity for surroundings, favors communication and socialization, and offers opportunities for the development of creativity and imagination (Fabregat, Costa and Romero, 2004 in Goldstein, Buckingham and Brougère, 2004, pp. 226-227).

Play separates itself from ordinary life although it often bases its material on it (Caillois, 1958, p. 24). The world of play offers children a way of dealing with the world and identity premised on flux (Allison, 2006, p. 279). 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). A great deal of play happens through interaction with toys. Toys are valuable playtime products as they *permit children to grow together, meet each other, understand each other, and share common experiences* (Fabregat, Costa and Romero, 2004, p. 227). Why should these findings from children's interaction with playthings not apply to adults?

3. Designing Toy Experiences

Perhaps the most important aim of design today is not to serve our needs and help our goal achievement, but give meaning to our lives (Nurkka, 2008). Consumers seek their way towards experiences that produce meaning and generate pleasure. The essential elements in building fun and memorable experiences may have to do with playfulness and gaming.

Fun objects such as toys are associated with pleasant memories, reminding of past events, experiences of people (Cila and Erburg, 2008). A great deal of design research conducted in the past years has concentrated on product

usability. Since usability does not address the more fleeting qualities of interaction with products, such as aesthetics, associations, delight, excitement, challenge and many similar, relevant aspects of human experience, design research has moved beyond these areas (Battarbee, 2004, p. 23). As the experiences toys may deliver not only relate to the usability aspect, attention has to be paid to other areas of user experiences.

According to Green and Jordan, 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 (Green and Jordan, 2002, p.113). The appearance of an object, also that of a toy, affects our feelings (Norman, 2004, p. 46-49). Sometimes, a product is the object of our emotion, sometimes the product is the cause, and sometimes it is both (Desmet, 2002, p.6).

As Norman reminds, however, beyond the design of an object, there is a personal component - one that no designer or manufacturer can provide. We take pride in our possessions, not necessarily because we are showing off our wealth and status, but because they bring meaning to our lives (Norman, 2004, p. 6). Thus, toys are sources for both tangible and intangible experiences.

4. Adults as Players

Toys and games have generally been regarded as simple and insignificant pastimes for children. Earlier, there has been no thought of attributing the slightest cultural value to them (Caillois, 2001, p. 57). However, the importance of play material like toys and games is growing among adults.ⁱⁱ There has been a discussion about the infantilization of culture which links to the ludic phenomena.ⁱⁱⁱ There exists a name for the 'Peter Pans' of today: The result of kid and adult combined is a *kidult* – a person refusing to let go of behavioral patterns connected with childhood such as play with toys.

Bly sees the reason for infantilization in commercialization which nourishes hedonic desiring and decreases rational thought (Bly, 1996, pp. 44-60). Some explanations for the phenomenon have been sought in media: The occurrence of reality and makeover TV shows with their linked web sites indicate for some the terminal infantilization of adult culture (Goldstein, Jeffrey, Buckingham, David and Brougère, 2004, p. 4). According to Hietala, the kidult phenomena represents a dimension of the age of new romanticism, an era following postmodernity as described by Baudrillard and Jameson (Hietala, 2008). The rise of the Kidults may be one explanation for growing adult interest in playthings.

What kind of toys, then, are most often bought by adults? For example, the results of research conducted by Morris, Reddy and Bunting show suggest that teddy bears are now mostly bought and cuddled by adults (Morris, Reddy and Bunting, 1995, pp. 1697-1700). Indeed, many toys of today express a form of cuteness that is designed for adult audiences. Cuteness is generally associated with childhood and childlike experiences: innocence, dependence and freedom from the pressures of an adult world (Allison, 2006, p. 90). Still, as seen, cute objects are not only marketed and sold to children but to an adult audience. How does the relationship that an adult has to a toy differ from the one that a child has?

5. From Hyper-Real to the Fantastic

The trend in the doll stories of today seems to unfold in two directions: Some are associated with fantastic elements, some are aimed at a close simulation of reality. Attempts have been carried out in the children's toy market to make smart toy dolls that can crawl, walk and have language that develops in parallel with these functions. There is also an adult audience for the hyper-real: Dolls that imitate reality in their appearance, as the popularity of the work of many doll artists in the world proves: *Reborn* dolls simulate new born babies in terms of their looks and weight. These vinyl beings are painted with their real life equivalents in mind up to the most delicate details: their 'skin' is painted carefully with many layers and hair sewn to the head one strand 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.^{iv}

A genre of anatomically realistic adult size dolls, namely *Real Dolls*, attracts the audience as toys used for different reasons. Real Dolls function as surrogate (sex) partners to replace actual human relationships. These human adult 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 meaning of the expression.^v

Even though some toys are developing into increasingly human-like characters, another category – the one related with fantasy, still rules the toy world. Stuffed animals are by far the most liked toys in Finnish kindergartens, as the study carried out by Ruckenstein points out (Heljakka, 2008). Stuffed animals, or plush, are well liked by adults as well. Sutton-Smith seeks reasons for adult fascination with plush animals by comparing them with live pets. The enthusiasm for stuffed animals has some similarities than people's relationships with domestic animals. Pets alleviate stress and loneliness and add good humour to our lives (Sutton-Smith, 1986). A stuffed animal may be cuddled in a similar way.

As seen, the evolution of cuteness has shown that adults prefer infantilized features over realistic ones when it comes to fantasy toys or stuffed animals. Over its history, the teddy bear has evolved from a long-snouted, long-limbed bear to a cute, snub-nosed, baby-like creature. The attributes that adult players seem to prefer in bears are the set of stimuli most appropriate for releasing nurturant behaviour in adults. The relatively large forehead and head, large and low-lying eyes, bulging cheek region, short and thick limbs, springy elastic consistency and clumsy movements of many young animals summate to form an innate releasing mechanism for nurturing behaviour (Morris, P. H, Reddy, V. and Bunting, 1995, pp.1697-1700).

Historically, the popularity of the plush animal starts with the teddy bear – the world's first mass-marketed character toy - and stretches as far as to the Uglydolls of today, a particularly strong plush trend among adult audiences – *designer toys*.

6. Cute Meets Monstrous

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. Designer toys first appeared in the 1990's and have their origin in Asia, more accurately in urban graphic design culture in Hong Kong. The prominent players in the designer toy scene began as collectors of vintage children's toys, driven by nostalgia for childhood and delight in quirky design (Lubow, 2004). Contemporary design trends, however, are increasingly guiding the design of the toy objects of today. Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects. Smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy call forth specifics such as helplessness, pitifulness and even despondency (Ngai, 2005). Often following these principles of design, designer toys thus form an antithesis to the hyper-real dolls described above.

Japanese *manga* (comics) and *kawaii* have strongly influenced the characteristics of the plush designer toys of the recent years. Fantasy is far more valued than realism as the creative aesthetic of popular entertainment in Japan (Allison, 2006, p. 47). Takashi Murakami's projects suggest that it is possible for cute objects to look helpless and aggressive at the same time (Ngai, 2005). For example Pikachu [from the television series *Pokémon*] is an animated representation of precisely nothing we know in our physical world. (Kelts, 2007). This strangeness seems to inspire both doll designers and adult players.

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 likenesses, 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.

In *Millennial monsters*, as Allison names them (Allison, 2006), the monstrous meets with the childish and naïve. One category of designer plush dolls, namely *Uglydolls* have soft, unthreatening bodies and wear vulnerable expressions. As Nakamura puts it, the dolls do not have 'an art vibe' to them although they are considered designer plush. Instead, Uglydolls look comfortable and huggable (Walker, 2004). One of the attributes of the dolls is that these characters seem self-deprecating. Most importantly, they hit an emotional chord in people. As Allison puts it, characters are defined not just by their physical attributes alone (big head, small body, huge eyes, absent nose) but also, and more importantly, by the relationships people form with them (Allison, 2006, pp.205-206). These new age dolls can both be seen as playthings and collectable items.

7. Aspects of Adult Play

Collecting represents one important aspect of both child and adult 'play'. As Sutton-Smith puts it, collections are mixtures of imagination and mastery (Sutton-Smith, 1986, p.192). What motivates collecting, then? 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 (Kalliala, 1999, p. 261). As one collects, 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. To some, dolls have become extensions of other hobbies such as photographing or some form of arts & crafts, like sewing.^{vi} For instance, so called *Blythe* dolls have gained a large audience in adults when looking at images produced of toys in the Internet. The dolls, which are given personalized looks and attributes are dressed and decorated in various ways and then taken on field trips in actual environments where the dolls are photographed in different settings. These images become toy stories which are shared with other toy enthusiasts.

8. Toy Stories: Bonding With Designed Dolls

Homo ludens, the playing human, is, when playing also *homo narrans*, the storytelling human. Telling stories begins at an early age in human development and includes expressing oneself through imitation. Play theorist Jean Piaget has pondered why the child enjoys pretending to sleep, wash, swing and ‘bring a bird’ as sleeping and washing most certainly are not games of any kind. He explains that when these tasks are practiced symbolically, they become play. The child gets pleasure in seeing himself do the tasks and showing them to others, in a word - to *express* himself (Piaget, 1962, pp. 121, 130). Again, says Piaget, in projecting his own behaviors on others (as in making animals and dolls cry, eat, drink or sleep) in his play, the child himself is imitating the actions they do when they reproduce his own actions. *When real scenes are reproduced in games with dolls, imitation is at its maximum.* What then, is the function of this form of playing? According to Piaget, the child is exercising his present life far more than rehearsing future activities (Piaget, 1962).

In a similar way an adult may find enjoyment in expressing himself through showing, or rather, *displaying*, his/her toys as creative photographic representations in the Internet. When adults make displays of dolls or plush in different scenarios, the questions remain whether or not they are subconsciously dealing with things going on in their current lives? Do the scenes played out by adults with the help of their dolls reflect on their hopes and dreams on a subconscious level? Are adult players, in fact, using toys as instruments in disguise to play out personal feelings?

At least to some level, adult players infuse something from their behaviour to the toy characters when letting them enter the ‘magic circle’ of a display. The toys thus come to represent their players. When playing, the players also tell stories to oneself (Kalliala, 1999, p.62; Geertz, 1993, p. 448). The toy user lives through the experience, is the recipient of the story who rewrites the narrative and connects with the toy object on an emotional level. However, the original stories tied to the characters and the role models related to them do not hinder new variations (Kalliala, 1999, p. 155). The owner of a toy is free to continue the narrative as s/he pleases. This can, according to my view, be seen in many toy displays as shown in toy images on *flickr*.

Apart from being storytelling devices, Uglydolls, as designer toys in general, encourage adult players to other forms of displaying. There are 30-year olds who buy the dolls because they look good on their sofa (Mustafa, 2006). Luutonen says that a person, in a way, ‘builds’ her inner being or the image s/he wants to represent with clothing and choices of interior decoration. Objects offer a possibility to communicate with other people (Luutonen, 2007, p. 79). Battarbee names products that facilitate communication as ‘conversation pieces’

(Battarbee, 2004, pp. 38-39). Adults thus either play with the toys by giving them personalities or display the toys for several motivations. Or, both play and display their beloved toy objects. Most importantly: when acquired, the toys come alive as emotions and personal characteristics are projected on them.

Also, creating toy displays may result in artistic gratification, as LeClerc points out: From the physical manipulation of an object one can rearrange for display or real play. As one consumes the industrial product, one simultaneously appreciates the artwork (LeClerc, 2008).

Another possibility to explain adult fascination with designer dolls is provided by the theory of anthropomorphism: This can help to explain when people are likely to attribute human-like traits to nonhuman agents. Norman argues that humans are predisposed to anthropomorphize, to project human emotions and beliefs into anything (Norman, 2004, p. 138).

Sociality motivation is the fundamental need for social connection with other humans. When lacking social connection with other humans, people may compensate by creating humans out of nonhuman agents through anthropomorphism (Akalis and Cacioppo, 2008, pp.143-155). What on one hand is an extension of the self is, on the other, a means for interacting imaginatively with the world outside. Fetishism with things not only does reflect the hierarchical relationships between people, but creates entire social groups, says Ilmonen (Ilmonen, 2007, p. 268). Through objects, such as dolls, we may communicate in virtual media, as seen in the following.

9. The Digital Doll-dom as Seen on *flickr*

How are toys, then, displayed on the Internet? In *flickr* one meets thousands of toy related images. Dolls, action figures and designer toys are photographed as collections and in all settings imaginable. The toys are placed as actors in different scenarios or simply to show what the player has done to them: painted, sown, re-arranged, ridiculed or treasured them, and now shares his or her possession/obsession for others to admire and appreciate. The comments of other flickr users (viewers) proves this true: The more creative the toy display, the more appreciating are the comments.

The Internet was first and foremost introduced to the home with help from homework, but not as a vehicle of entertainment such as the television set or the games console. Now, the Internet can certainly be seen as much of, or even more of a source of entertainment than an educational tool (Albero-Andrés, 2004, p. 119). Also, as Ween points out, in the age of the 'homo zappiens' the internet not only functions as a library for information, but more importantly a platform of communication (Ween, 2008). Fandom often creates communities in the Internet as described by Laitinen and Mäyrä (Laitinen and Mäyrä, 2003). As stated by Kokko, 57% of all Internet users have joined a social network (Kokko, 2008).

New Internet resources make it increasingly possible to see this media also as a creative tool. Photo management applications such as flickr allow a self-organizing of playful communities. As a user of flickr, one is creating part of the content, and so one feels a personal emotional connection to it. According to Shusterman, aesthetic experience gains intensity from a sense of sharing something meaningful and valuable together, and this includes the feeling of shared pleasures (Shusterman, 2003, p. 304). As flickering through toy images on the Internet

certainly seems to give aesthetic experiences to many, it can be seen as a shared pleasure as described by Shusterman.

The success of these internet-based applications have their groundwork in the generalization of digital photographing as a hobby and the social needs of the photographers to gain audiences and recognition to their achievements. These applications offer versatile possibilities to group, comment and search images based on their popularity or theme. Based on the consecutive numbers of singular photographs, the users of flickr had shared over 250 million images by the end of September 2006 (Mäyrä, 2007, p. 211). By the end of November 2008, 371,196 of these uploaded images were photographs related to toys.

The digital culture is many-voiced as seen by Mäyrä: To some it functions as a liberating communication forum for one's life and creativity. Digital images, games and communication are rich and diverse cultural forums for groups and individuals who have started to create content and meanings for the concept of digital culture (Mäyrä, 2007, p. 218). As stated by Kline, the virtual sociability created in computer mediated play is a phenomenon that will need further studying (Kline, 2004, p. 152). Making and sharing a doll hobby with others in the new media nevertheless seems to evoke enjoyable and pleasurable experiences with these types of toys.

10. Further Studies: Building Blocks of 'Wow'

After discussing the playthings of today and reflecting on adult play with these objects we can see that Brian Sutton-Smith's comment from *Toys as Culture* no longer holds exactly true: Toys are becoming more social again. And - playthings should be regarded as phenomena that infiltrate all age groups.

Neil Friedman, C.E.O of one of the world's greatest toy empires (Mattel), sees the element of "wow" as crucial for toys. This element thrills the one who interacts with the toy character with fun, innovation, new technologies and other interesting features.^{vii} In my own view, the visual dimension of toys represents one of the most important contributors of 'wow', especially regarding designing of doll characters.

Considering the growing influence on Japanese characteristics in contemporary visual culture, the toy designers of today surely have to pay attention to the successful building blocks of kawaii - the cute, anti-cutesy and yet altogether adorable, as these according to my study may be the current building blocks for 'wow' in toys. Nevertheless, further research needs to be conducted, to better evaluate which elements in toy design constitute meaningful and pleasurable, *emotional* experiences.

Also, toy designers should keep in mind that users may all buy the same product, but each product adapts to a life of its own (Battarbee, 2003, p.107) The user of a product attaches his or her own meanings into it. Both the physical properties of a thing and the values given to the thing affect the formation of meaning (Vihma, 1995). These meanings may differ greatly from the ones from the objectives of the designer (Luutonen, 2007, p. 16). As said, designer dolls include the potential beginning for a story, but ultimately, it is the player who creates the narrative.

Controversial as it seems, it would be naïve to assume that to serve the well-being of humans one should design products to elicit only pleasant emotions. It may be more interesting to design products that elicit 'paradoxical

emotions' that is, positive and negative emotions simultaneously, says Desmet.^{viii} Reactions to millennial monsters - designed doll characters, are often controversial and it would be useful for designers to know which features elicit different kind of experiences in dolls. The principals of cuteness are known, but what else is there to discover? What are the toy stories, which I have begun to explore here, actually telling us?

As Fabregat, Costa and Romero argue, there is still plenty of work required in the field of toy design to ensure that the design of toys takes into account the end user (Fabregat, Costa and Romero, 2004, p. 225). Thus, further studies on how experience may be considered as a building block in toy design needs to be carried out. Designers of today need to know what really constitutes the 'wow' effect in toy experiences.

Toy objects may not be valuable per se, but the meanings, time and effort given to these objects increase the value of the things. Principally, playthings are designed for fun or enjoyment. This is difficult, as seen by Battarbee: on one hand certain products are quite supportive of enjoyable experiences, but ultimately their success always depends on the person's willingness to be entertained (Battarbee, 2004, p. 54). Cila and Erbug claim that one cannot be designing a fun experience. The designers can only 'design *for* experience'. By analyzing the users thoroughly and investigating their expectations and needs, the designers can 'design *for* fun experiences' (Cila and Erbug, 2008).

As methods of research for understanding user experience Koskinen, Battarbee and Mattelmäki suggest ethnographic research based on observations and interviews as these research methods have become common practice in more advanced design companies. Designers may also participate in the lives of the people they study. They 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, Battarbee, and Mattelmäki, 2003, p.147). Valuable viewpoints can be found in the areas of emotional design and character design as in visual entertainment (animation and game design). Seen in this view, a toy researcher needs to be a player herself. This is exactly my intention in the next stages of my research when deepening my studies of the fantastic relationships between people and toys in our visual world – to be a player and displayer of dolls in order to better understand the underlying motivations for play with designed toy objects such as dolls. Design, play and display of dolls all create intriguing areas of toy research. So tell me a toy story – I am eager to learn more.

11. Notes

ⁱ According to Piaget a child combines new information with earlier one while playing. This creates new meaning. (See Piaget, Jean, *Play, Dreams and Imitation In Childhood*, 1962, New York, Norton)

ⁱⁱ The argument is based on an observation made by myself about the development of the toy industry. I have worked as head of design and development for a game company for the past nine years.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, professor of sociology, Frank Furedi at Kent university examines this phenomena in his article *The children who won't grow up*, available at <http://www.frankfuredi.com/index.php/site/article/103/>

^{iv} Interview with doll artist Christel Tourneur-Putro, 26.11.2008. See Heljakka, Katriina (2009) *Pieniä ihmeitä*. [Small Miracles] Lelukauppias, 1/2009

^v <http://www.realdolls.com> (cited on 25.11.2008)

^{vi} These Asian doll characters have communities of their own in the Internet. An example of a Finnish web site can be found at <http://hartsilapset.fi/forum/>

^{vii} The “cool” appearance of a toy is also discussed by Gene del Vecchio, who has interviewed industry professionals for his work *Creating Ever-Cool, A Marketer’s Guide to a Kid’s Heart* (Pelican Publishing Company, 1998).

^{viii} As an example Pieter Desmet gives Damien Hirst’s work ‘mother and child divided’. The efforts in designing paradoxical emotions could result in products that are unique, innovative, rich and interesting. See Desmet, Pieter, *Designing emotions*, University of Delft, 2002

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