



HAL
open science

Rethinking Adult Toy Play in the Age of Ludic Liberation: Imaginative, Visual and Social Object-Interactions of Mature Players

Katriina Heljakka

► **To cite this version:**

Katriina Heljakka. Rethinking Adult Toy Play in the Age of Ludic Liberation: Imaginative, Visual and Social Object-Interactions of Mature Players. 8th International Toy Research Association World Conference, International Toy Research Association (ITRA), Jul 2018, Paris, France. hal-02090957

HAL Id: hal-02090957

<https://sorbonne-paris-nord.hal.science/hal-02090957v1>

Submitted on 5 Apr 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Rethinking Adult Toy Play in the Age of Ludic Liberation

Imaginative, visual and social object-interactions of mature players

Katriina Heljakka

Post-doctoral researcher, University of Turku

Abstract

This paper challenges the readers to rethink adult toy play by demonstrating evidence for the rich and multifaceted nature of contemporary adult toy play cultures. It is based on a ten-year period of extensive research among mature toy players and illustrates the necessity of a shift in thinking about the user-groups of toys. The paper as a think piece bases on long-term, rigorous research, and argues for the need to acknowledge adult toy play as an important and growing area of contemporary toy cultures. It summarizes the work of a toy researcher interested in adult toy relations (conducted between years 2008-2018) and has a two-way agenda: By turning to cultural phenomena related to ludification and toyification of culture, it functions both as a cultural analysis of the ludic *Zeitgeist*, as well as a mapping of what has been learned about adult play in contemporary toy cultures so far. The case studies featured in this paper have been grounded in multiple readings and analyses of the manifestations of adult toy play as presented in photoplay (or toy photography) displayed on social media, e.g. Flickr and Instagram. It is supplemented with thematic interviews and participatory observation at toy conventions. Moreover, research methods include an extensive literary review in connection with doctoral research (Heljakka, 2013) and post-doctoral studies (2014-2018), and empirical studies (based on closer visual analyses of toy collections and qualitative interviews with mature players aged between 25-50+ years) on adult toy play in reference to contemporary character toys such as doll-types *Blythe* (Tomy Takara), *Barbie* and *Ken* (Mattel), *My Little Pony* (Hasbro), and *Star Wars* toys (by various toy makers).

Keywords: Adult toy play, toys, object play, photoplay, mature players

Introduction: From adult playfulness to acknowledgment of adult play

We have come to an age, which according to scholars such as Sutton-Smith (1997), Combs (2000) and Raessens (2006) is more ludic in nature. The ludification of culture correlates with the age of the ludic turn envisioned by Sutton-Smith, and this turn manifests itself as a moment in time in which *homo ludens* has many ages.

My interest in the play of adults' centres around toy-play: the uses adults find for toys, and character toys in particular, or *toys with a face*—dolls, action figures and soft toys. While the benefits of play have been widely recognized, carrying out activities with toys at adult age is still often seen as stigmatizing behaviour. Some adults solve this issue by referring to their toy activities as hobbies or collecting (Heljakka et al., 2018, 2781). Nevertheless, claims Lurker: "All the negative attitudes and opinions that play is infantile, undignified, trivial, frivolous, superfluous, a sinful waste of time, or even the source of evil are really unnecessary" (Lurker, 1990, 164).

The ongoing gamification of many areas of culture seems to have contributed to an alleviation of stigma previously associated with adult play: There is already a growing interest in this field e.g. in the context of game studies (e.g. Stenros, 2015; Deterding, 2017). A part of this interest is guided by the thought that the mature human also demands play(ful) experiences related to materiality.

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; c.f. in Heljakka, 2013, 25). While there is an ongoing *toyification* related to other cultural areas, objects, entities and experiences than toys (meaning that cultures related to for example design, art, fashion, technology, education, and the automotive industry are increasingly using toyish aesthetics and elements in different cultural products mainly to attract mature audiences, see e.g. Heljakka, 2016a), it is conspicuous that adult relationships with and consumption of actual toys are still mostly restricted to an understanding of these practices as expressions of nostalgia, goal-oriented activities of collecting, or the vague way of addressing the object interactions partaken with toys as a form of hobbying. Toy researchers such as Sutton-Smith have written how the combination of adults and toys seems peculiar indeed:

Most adults look at children's play with toys with a kind of amazement at how they can be so well occupied 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).

The aim of this paper is twofold: First, it aims to address, accentuate and theorize the topic of adult play as a new area of study in toy research. The second goal of the paper is to answer two questions: 1) What kind of toys are the adult toy players using in their play?, and 2) In which ways are adults playing with these toys?

Before tackling the aforementioned questions it is necessary to begin the discussion on adults and their use of toys by addressing a major issue brought forward in previous writings concerned with the playing adult, namely, the relationship between playfulness and play. In most instances, the adult is referred to be, at most, playful towards ludic objects such as toys, but is not often named as a player of these objects. To distance the rethinking of adult toy play promoted in this paper from these outdated views, it is therefore necessary to separate playfulness as an attitude from the activity that plays is. "Playing is what people do when they create culture", Sutton-Smith has stated (Meckley, 2015, 402). In other words, play is both functional and productive. Or, *playfulness* is a predisposition towards the world, and *play* as a way to interact with the world.

According to Barnett and Owens, what individuals mostly regard as play is a "pleasurable experience governed by internal motivation, an orientation toward process (means over ends) with self-imposed or absent goals, the propensity by individuals to assign their own meaning to objects or behaviours, and as often characterized by a focus on pretence and non-literality, relative freedom from externally imposed rules, and absorbed involvement" (Barnett & Owens, 2015, 454).

The literature on play concerns almost exclusively the play of children (Frappier, 1976, 1). While the term "play" has been less utilized to characterize what adults do, investigations into how adults utilize their free time for pleasure and enjoyment have also had a significant although more recent history (Barnett and Owens, 2015, 453). Play has many definitions. The following one is given by Frappier, who investigated adult play in his doctoral thesis in the 1970s:

play is doing something with a playful attitude, this attitude exhibiting certain characteristics such as uncertainty, conscious illusion, a dialectical movement of involvement and distancing, and creation of a microcosm which enables the player to deal with necessities and possibilities in a particular setting free from the usual constraints of his daily "situation" (Frappier 1976, 146).

Theorist of play, Johan Huizinga has stated that play is never a task or an obligation, but instead something that an adult could easily do without. What makes playing attractive, though, is the pleasure that can be sought in playing outside of work (Huizinga, 1992, 8).

To be sure, adults play actively, and such activities support patterns of social bonding, identity-maintenance, and physical and psychological well-being. Still, these adult practices are more likely to be addressed by scholars in the allied fields of sports, recreation, leisure, and tourism than by those who identify their contributions as play studies. A continuing challenge for studies of play then is to demonstrate the similarities and differences of that activity across the entire life span and to integrate these findings with the knowledge gained by the allied disciplines mentioned above (Henricks, 2015, 386-387).

Sutton-Smith has pondered on grown-up play by writing:

the play of the young prepares for life, doesn't make much sense for those of us who are grown-up, are still playing, and can hardly be said to be preparing for anything except perhaps death (to introduce a little melodrama here) (Sutton-Smith, 1993, 103).

As Barnett and Owens suggest, with increasing maturity play becomes more symbolic, complex, social, and interactive (Barnett & Owens, 2015, 454). Tegano and Moran (2015) describe playful adults as individuals, who are:

- i. guided by internal motivation and are oriented toward process
- ii. attribute their own meanings to objects or behaviors and are not bound by what they see
- iii. focus on pretend and seek freedom from externally imposed rules
- iv. are actively involved (Tegano & Moran, 2015, 179)

What about the *toy-playing* adults?

Kidults: New ways of addressing the matured 'toy-enthusiasts'

Toys are first and foremost considered to belong to children's culture. The rhetoric of toys encompasses adult relationships with these objects for the most part in relation to toy design, and at best, as addressing adults as *collectors* of toys, but not players of them. Even the International Toy Research Association presently states on its website that the association was created "in order to broaden and spread knowledge about toys and promote the development of good toys for children."

Despite growing interest of adults' toward toys, the discussion of e.g. good toy design and play value from the perspective of mature toy players is missing from theoretical writings altogether. Again, as the prominent rhetorics of adult interactions with toys relate distinctively to hobbying and collecting, they are at best said to be 'playful' activities but not to be considered to represent actual play. My interest in the play of adults' centres around toy-play: the uses adults find for toys particularly character toys, or toys with a face—dolls, action figures and soft toys.

Whereas toy play is usually considered to end at latest during the teenage years, the players of games seem to be less restricted by their biological age. The target audiences for games are thus seen as wider than the ones for toys. Board games, for example, are often considered to encompass transgenerational appeal. An interest for games and gaming then does not seem to carry a stigma that the toy playing adults sometime appear to have to deal with.

Deterding (2017, 275) explains that games are more suited for unembarrassed adult play than the free play we often associate with toy play: "Games are highly institutionalized and conventionalized and as such easily signalled and recognized, they come pre-legitimized with imputed motives on recreation, family time, and so on".

Game scholar Ian Bogost writes on the appeal of games: "Games aren't appealing because they are fun, but because they are *limited*. Because they erect boundaries. Because we must accept their structures in order to play them" (Bogost, 2016, x). But as Levinovitz explains, "toy play is fundamentally different from gameplay, and a key difference is increased agency on the part of the player" (Levinovitz, 2017, 270).

In other words, in order to be employed in play, toys require more active interaction of their player, first, in imagining their use in play scenarios, and second, in terms of their physical manipulation.

A prolonged childhood as an explanation to adult interest in toys and playful behaviour on a more general level, the criticized 'kidults' and 'Peter Pans' of our contemporary world and ASYL, meaning Adults Staying Younger Longer as a counter trend to KGOY, Kids Growing Older Younger, seem to attempt to twist and turn the discussion on toy play to various – and often concerned directions. Sometimes toys are discussed from the viewpoint of being a symptom of the infantilized adult. The Peter Pan syndrome, the so-called infantilization of culture together with the *age compression* as mentioned above, have been highlighted as anxieties both in sociology and the toy industry.

The fears for regression and infantilization steer the discussion on toy playing adults into unfruitful directions: The possibility to see adults toying with playthings previously associated only with children seems provoking enough to cause worries about a possible disappearance of the responsible and sensible adult. Is the matured toy player one of the final taboos of the age of the ludic turn?

As children grow and develop faster beyond the reach of toy companies, adults are reciprocally forming an even more significant group of buyers and consumers for new playthings. In fact, already in 2013, the publication for an industry related event in Hong Kong stated that, "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" (HKTDC Hong Kong Toys & Games fair publication Fair Daily, Issue 2, Tuesday 8th of January 2013).

Adults have, for a long time, been acknowledged as buyers of toys—as their collectors. But: "Collectors are a pimple on the elephants ass", Larry Bernstein from Hasbro famously stated in Miller's book *Toy Wars* from 1998. Exactly twenty years later, in 2018, this statement has proved to be dated, as for example Funko (maker of Funko "Pops!" vinyl collectibles) mostly caters for the adult market: adult collectors may, in fact, represent the main target group for these toys. Adult 'toy enthusiasts', also recognized as 'kidults' are now acknowledged as a paying buyers within the supersystem of commercial toys as the industries of play (Heljakka, 2013), but not necessarily as playing individuals. For example, a significant part of Lego 'builders' are adults, but rather than players of these construction toys, they are diplomatically referred to as AFOLs, or Adult Fans of Lego. Star Wars toys, again, are believed to be 'right' for the adult collectors, when they are right for the toy playing children:

Author: 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.¹

The most common way to identify, acknowledge and approve of adult toy play in reference to the toy industry then, is still to name this type of play as *collecting*. Nevertheless, adult relationships and activities with toys often extend beyond the

¹ At an industry event, I was able to ask the head of Lucas Licensing about the company's stance on adult players. This quote from *The Force of Three Generations* (2011) was originally presented in my doctoral dissertation. See Heljakka, 2013, p. 230.

accumulation of toys that collecting is often recognized for. These activities often include a creative cultivation of and imaginative interactions with the toys. Still, many adults find it difficult to discuss their activities with toys as a form of play—or even their collected, customized, photographed, and befriended artefacts as *toys* even though they in general terms are precisely that—physical objects intended for playing purposes—to be *playable*. As has been suggested elsewhere (Heljakka, 2018a) the dimensions of the toy experience are physicality, functionality, fictionality and affectivity. These dimensions together influence the playability of the toy.

The idea of toy play as an enjoyable hobby that is partaken during leisure time does not explain adult toy play fully as a phenomenon. Therefore, we must dig deeper to grasp at least some kind of understanding of how object play happens at adult age, to understand its nature in the contemporary world.

Relationships and interactions: Object play in adulthood

While the *toyification of culture* (see e.g. Heljakka 2016) calls out for a playful attitude in mature audiences in terms of interacting with objects, spaces and experiences outside of the traditional realm of toys, it is the area of toys that requires to be discussed in terms of play regardless of the demographics of their users.

Despite the fact that previous studies on adult play bypass the topic of toy playing adults, attempts to profile adult toy users have been made. In my doctoral research (Heljakka, 2013) I proposed the following four groups of adults, who express a fondness for toys and declare them as relevant objects and even so from the viewpoint of play:

- **Collectors:** Adult toy players who accumulate toys to form and curate a collection. This group of players is largely interested in the functionality and fictionality of the toys: their value and displayability, but also the toys' connection to transmedia worlds.
- **Toy designers:** Adult toy players who have an enthusiasm for toys as professional designers of new toys. This group often represents collectors and fans, who draw inspiration from their childhood toys but simultaneously create and collect new toys—either designer editions and/or mass-marketed toys. The main areas of interest for this group are the aspects of physicality and fictionality of the toys.
- **Artists' toying:** Adult toy players who use toys in their artistic profession either as inspirational thematic material or physical raw-material in their

art-making. The artists who are toying have an interest in the toys physical, functional and fictional dimensions.

- **'Everyday players':** Adult toy players who represent the non-professional users of toys, and who may be collectors, but one the one hand express having an emotional bond, and thus, an affective component in their relationship to their toys, and on the other hand, use the toys in cultivation of their creativity: customization, storytelling and world-play of different kinds.

Adults in the four aforementioned groups of 'toy enthusiasts' choose their play materials from an abundance of different toys: collectables, designer (or art) toys that come in limited numbers, unique handcrafted items, but also mass-produced toys familiar from childhood play. Yet, the way adults play may not always be the same compared to how the child employs the plaything. To give an example, a dialogue between father and son in *The Lego Movie* (2014) demonstrates how toys are not necessarily referred to as objects of play in adulthood:

Dad: "You know the rules. This isn't a toy."

Finn: "Um, well, it kind of is."

Dad: "No. Actually it's a highly sophisticated interlocking brick system."

Finn: "We bought it at the toy store."

Dad: "We did. But the way I'm using it makes it an adult thing."

The way Finns father refers to the toy as an 'adult thing' in this fictive conversation points to the differences of playing with the toy: While Finn employs the bricks and Lego figures to play out imaginative scenarios, his father is building a city of the pieces, fixing everything with glue as he advances. What is central here is to identify and understand the different types of object play that take place: The one for the sake of mobilizing and vocalizing, and in this way, role-playing with Lego, and the other because of an interest to produce a piece for *displaying* purposes, for which playing aspect is embedded first in the process of building, and second, in the imagination of the player. Consequently, the playing with the toy manifests either by the manipulation of the toy, which takes place by the hand, by the mind or through both. Therefore, to understand the rich and multifaceted forms of play adults employ toys in, it is key to comprehend how the playability of a toy in adult thinking is not only dependent on the toys' manipulability, but also the imaginative, visually-emerging and socially-sharable manifestations of adult toy play which are largely grounded in their *displayability*. These forms of play will be discussed in the following.

Case studies of character-based toy play: Blythe, Ken, My Little Pony, and Star Wars

“The existence of a true toy seems to depend on the freedom of the player in relation to the play-object, but it is unclear exactly how”. What we know, however, is that whereas “games invite players to define their movement, toys invite players to define them” (Levinovitz, 2017, 270; 278).

Based on Thibault’s (2017, 98) summary, the four areas of adult toy play are dialogue, collection, creation and observation. My attention turns next to verify these aspects of play, by revisiting case studies focusing on three types of character toys, namely dolls, fantasy characters and action figures.

Montola writes on the ephemerality of play: “Play is transient and vanishing; after play concludes, it is impossible to access it, except through witness reports, photographs and artefacts produced and used in play” (Montola 2012, 74).

If we cannot be present when adults are playing with their toys for example at cons or adult play dates, evidence for adult object relations and interactions must be sought elsewhere: In products and documentations of adult toy play. One possible source for this evidence is the visual and social practice of *photoplay*, or photographing of toys, which besides collecting and displaying of toys, represents one of the most prominent play patterns of adult toy players. “Photoplay represents an avenue for ludic experimentation for adults that entails the use of creativity in combination with camera technologies and activities on social media” (Heljakka et al., 2018, 2783).

Besides analyses of photoplay, the investigations on adult toy play highlighted in this paper use a multi-methodological approach: Interviews (personal, e-mail, online questionnaires), participatory observation (at play dates, cons), analyses of toy photographs and videos, and author conducted *autoplay* (as an ethnographic means to explore the personal playing self) have been utilized.

As examples of case studies carried out with adult toy-players, we will next turn to four specific examples of three types of toys with their related play as demonstrated by the adults who have participated in my studies during the past ten years; Blythe, Barbie and Ken (dolls), My Little Pony (fantasy characters) and Star Wars action figures.

Dolls: Blythe (Tomy Takara) and Ken (Mattel)

Blythe, Barbie and Ken dolls are played creatively by collectors, the artists' toying, and everyday players. My case studies with Blythe and Barbie represent the playing of fashion dolls with different, but colourful histories and multifaceted patterns of play associated with them (Heljakka 2012; 2016). These dolls are not only accumulated to form a collection, but also personalized in terms of physical and fictional object play. That is to say that not only do their visual and aesthetic qualities matter, but moreover, their tactile dimensions and narrative dimensions. Despite Barbie's back-story as Barbara Millicent Roberts, the doll has been played in manifold ways if the adults observed and interviewed for my research are to believe. Again, the Blythe doll is much more open to interpretation in play, and thus more open narratively. This makes the plaything particularly suitable for customization, fashion-oriented play and storytelling. Blythes have been used as both decorative elements, anthropomorphized companions, avatars for their owners and tools in toy stories documented through photoplay. Customization by change of hair, make-up, and clothing (which parallels Tibault's "creation"), or positioning the toy in an unfamiliar environment either indoors, urban spaces or natural environments contribute further to the rewriting of its story. While the toying artists' are interested in both Blythe and Barbie because of their physical and functional affordances for play, they tend to reinterpret their back-story in novel ways, using the doll to role-play and re-play characters familiar from real human history (see figure 1.) as well as fictions of popular culture.



Figures 1 and 2; 1. *Karjala 1944*. Photoplay of the author based on real-life war time events in Finland photoplayed according to manuscript by comic artist Hanneriina Moisseinen. 2. Photoplay by Susanna Mattheiszen depicting *Ken of Finland*, 'a gaudy male doll who likes to wear dresses.'

The Ken doll has a seemingly marginal role in doll history, but nevertheless presents the adult toy players an interesting resource for play of various kinds. In a study focusing on play with Ken (Heljakka, 2015b, and figure 2.), the functionality of the doll often recognized as an ‘accessory’ of Barbie, proved to be richer than this: The player interviewed (also an avid collector of other toys) described her affective relationship—a special bond—to the doll, who in her play, was turned into sort of a toy activist, celebrating the transgender movement and freedom to play at adult age in both the public sphere, and in the realm of social media (see figure 2.).

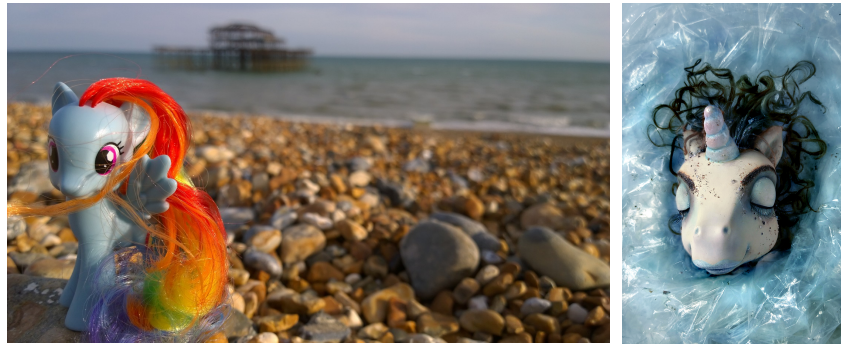
The (male) physicality of the doll was, in this way, considered as a functional starting point for a toy story mostly meant to be enjoyed by the toy playing adult and her peers on social media through a dialogue enhanced by adult toy play.

Fantasy characters: My Little Pony (Hasbro)

My Little Pony, a series of pastel-coloured, plastic ponies with a starting point in the 1980s, has since evolved into a massive transmedia phenomenon (Heljakka, 2015a) that today attracts a wide fan base of players of different ages. MLP (as the brand name is abbreviated) attracts collectors, artists’ toying and everyday players. Often, each of these groups uses the toys in many ways, for example, artists have a pony collection, collectors value the toys for their displayability and photogenicity and so on. The everyday players, again, have demonstrated not only the adults’ aesthetic preferences of and affective relationships with the ponies (because of their cuteness) but also because their ‘fiddle-factor’—they can be groomed, and in this way, hair-played with. Moreover, ponies are poseable (see figure 3), and because of their plastic physiognomy also afford creative customization (see figure 4).

MLPs are undoubtedly collected toys, but they are also re-created and re-interpreted in play. Furthermore, the dialogue stimulated by playing with them comes both from observing the playing of others as well as accepting this invitation to play.

Consequently, despite its contemporary visibility on television, and the popularity that it has resulted in, *My Little Pony* still seems to cater for all the four dimensions of the toy experience: the physicality, functionality, fictionality and affectivity.



Figures 3 and 4. 3. My Little Pony photoplayed by the author during toy tourism in Brighton. 4. “My Little Laura Palmer”, a pony customized into a Twin Peaks character made by contemporary artist Mari Kasurinen.

Action figures: Star Wars toys (by various toy makers)

Star Wars today, is recognized as the world’s largest transmedia phenomenon. As such, the related toys are known to attract players of many ages, including the matured. Collectors, toying artists as well as everyday players immerse themselves in the fantasy that *Star Wars* is, and the toys function as portals of major importance to make the cinematic, televised and gamified fantasies tangible. The toys are accumulated, displayed and photoplayed (see figures 5 and 6) to the extent that *Star Wars* also appears to have the largest presence in fan art and tributes, but also novel interpretations of its story worlds, on visual and digital content sharing platforms such as Instagram. Socially shared world-play with *Star Wars* marks a profound case of adult toy play that functions as evidence for the multidimensional adult object interactions: collecting, creating, observing, and entering a playful dialogue in the 21st century. This play, just like the playing with *Blythe*, *Barbie*, *Ken* and *My Little Pony*, shows how the physicality of toys comes together with camera and media technology when played narratively and shared digitally (Heljakka 2018b).



Figures 5 and 6. Photoplay of Star Wars characters interacting with author's two Uglydoll Ice-Bat figures by Janne Mällinen (to the left) known as 'Truupperi' on Instagram .

The imaginative, visual and social worlds of "What if?" in adult toy play

Sutton-Smith addresses the idealisation of the toy as related to the imagination as one of the precursors to his seven rhetorics of play, published in the *Ambiguity of Play* (1997). Imagination plays an integral part in both adult relationships with toys, as well as the actual play scenarios carried out with them. In other words, the imaginativeness of the adults has an effect on how (character) toys are displayed, posed and mobilized both in domestic environments and outdoors.

Play with toys is always story-driven play (Thibault 2017, 116). Nevertheless, “we do not play to refine what we already know; we play to discover what we do not yet know” (Sutton-Smith, 2017, 11). At many instances, toy play of adults mimic characters, scenes and plots familiar from stories celebrated in popular culture, and in this way, a re-playing of what is already known takes place (see e.g. Heljakka, 2016b).

One does not need toys in order to be able to play. Still, in the light of the research I have conducted during the past ten years, toys seem to function as keys for adults to help in unlocking the doors to imaginative worlds and creative playing with them. In this mature object play activity, toys, play, and stories intertwine. Toys and narratives thus have an intimate relationship that does not limit itself to fiction only, but also draw plentiful inspiration from real life scenarios of adults (as well as the toy playing children). Still, while children have a stronger tendency to “play out” what has happened to them in real life, adults seem to be more prone towards playing with possibility—acting out toy scenarios that animate, or bring “to life”, or rather, to three-dimensional—their fantasies and fears. Bogost suggests that “we don’t play in order to distract ourselves from the world, but in order to partake in it” (Bogost, 2016, 233). When toy play of adults becomes social, for example, through sharing of photoplay on the Social Web, the playing opens up conversa-

tions not only about toys, but on a larger scale, open dialogues about the human condition.

My exploration on the virtual and playgrounds of the Internet, which have provided ample research material during my years of research, such as Flickr, Instagram and YouTube, come to reveal that toys, in the 21st century, can no longer be viewed as childhood playthings only. These social media platforms have made adult toy play more perceivable as the 'toy stories' of adults shared for example in the name of photoplay demonstrate how the toys' physical, functional, fictional and affective affordances are put into play. It is undeniable that many adults collect toys, and both curate and cultivate their collections in creative ways. Although displayability plays a significant role for the attraction of toys for adult toy players, some of the playing also takes place in the fictional and imaginative worlds played in the mind of the players. Toys are in this way, playable as poseable and photoplayable vehicles for storytelling—a media within the transmediascape, or supersystem of play. Sutton-Smith says that the play of the mind receives its outer manifestation in play and in this way, fantasy becomes a part of reality (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 21; 60-61). In playing with character toys their physicality meets the materiality of the imagination and together form a surface for reflections and superimposing of dreams and desires. The toy stories imagined and toyified by adult toy players expand into visual playgrounds, when socially mediated and shared.

Even though the toy industry with its designers may invite adults to play with toys in certain ways by providing a back-story, physical posture and personality for the toy by giving it various physical, functional and fictional affordances, the toy experience that often withholds an emotional component, results from these dimensions only once the toy is animated in play. In the age of the ludic turn, the toy playing adult is fully capable of bringing a toy to life just like the playing child.

Conclusion: Ludic liberation of adult toy play

Playing facilitates the blending of reality and fantasy (Brown, 2009, 136). For the toy playing child the plaything may be a key to reality. For the adult, an object may lead to the world of fantasy (Soini, 1997). In toy play, both children and adults carry out inner dialogues with the playthings, project both real life experiences and wishful scenarios on it. In the light of the research conducted, adult play no longer becomes perceivable exclusively through activities in the realms of gaming, arts, or sports, but also through the creative and interactive toy play on the playgrounds of fan cultures and social media. Moreover, in its many forms adult toy play presents

itself as a creative and productive activity (Heljakka, 2013, 43), fulfilling the creative aspect of play.

“In new media cultures, play has moved centre-stage in its significance in the creative forms of production and recreation” (Marshall, 2004, 43-44). Adult interaction, creativity, and skill-building with contemporary toys are new areas of research concerning object play practices at a mature age, an emerging phenomenon. Adult object play is a multifaceted, creative, and goal-oriented activity in which materials are manipulated, re-appropriated, and creatively cultivated (Heljakka, 2016; 2016a).

The results of my studies point to that the role of imagination and capability to become immersed in the toy stories, created by oneself and other mature players through object interactions with various character toys, is significant in adult toy play. Contrary to common belief, adults, like children, are capable of creatively cultivating the toys' personalities, material dimensions and even environments of their character toys in their multifaceted forms of play. Consequently, the necessity of the shift in thinking from hobbying, toy collecting and from playfulness as an attitude of the adult toy 'enthusiast' to *pure play*, allows the inspection of adult interactions with contemporary toy objects as a form of true ludic behaviour. The time has come to acknowledge and address the human adult as—besides a hobbyist, collector and fan of toys—also as a creative, humorous, clever, artistic and social player of these objects. That toy play seems to have gained a more allowing ground as an adult pastime in the age of the ludic turn does perhaps then, not come as a surprise. After all, as Sutton-Smith writes: "Life, it seems, always becomes more exciting when the hope of play exists" (Sutton-Smith, 2017, 16).

Multifaceted object interactions in combination with imaginative capacities and social sharing of the play acts as presented in this paper all contribute to current understandings of adult toy play. In sum, according to my research, adults who are toy enthusiasts in the 21st century clearly represent more than collectors and hobbyists with an interest in toys. They should most of all be understood as toy players with similar passions and practices with toys as the usual 'play workers' of the Western society—the children. The mature object players of today present a multitude of imaginative, visual and social object interactions with toys. To conclude, in the light of the findings presented in this paper, I would suggest the following. Rather than asking ourselves: “How can we see the adult as a toy player?” Is to liberate us ludically, and ask: “How can we *not*?”

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express her gratitude to all the adult toy players who have acted as interviewees throughout the past ten years of my toy research, and the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong National Museum of Play for kindly assisting in finding materials on adult (toy) play during my research fellowship. This paper was written as a part of the Academy of Finland funded research project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (decision #312396).

References

- BARNETT, L. A. & OWENS, M. H. (201X): "Does Play Have to be Playful?", in Johnson, J. E., Eberle, S., G., Henricks, T., S., and Kuschner, D. (Eds.) *The Handbook of the Study of Play*, Co-published with The Strong, pp. 453-459.
- BERG, L-E., NELSON, A., and SVENSSON, K. (eds.) (1996) *Toys in educational and sociocultural context. Toy research in the late twentieth century. Part 1. Selection of Papers presented at the International Toy Research Conference*, Halmstad University, Sweden.
- BOGOST, Ian (2016) *Play Anything. The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*, Basic Books, New York.
- DETERDING, S. (2018). Alibis for Adult Play: A Goffmanian Account of Escaping Embarrassment in Adult Play. *Games and culture*, 13(3), pp. 260-279.
- FRAPPIER, Paul (1976) *The Playing Phenomenon in Adults* (dissertation) Université du Québec, Montreal.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2012) Aren't you a doll! Toying with avatars in digital playgrounds, *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 4(2), pp. 153—170.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2013): *Principles of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures. From Wow, to Flow, to Glow*. (Doctoral dissertation), Helsinki, Aalto ARTS books.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2015a). From toys to television and back: My Little Pony appropriated in adult toy play. *The Journal of Popular Television*, 3(1), pp. 99-109.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2015b). Lelulaatikon rajoja rikkomassa: Tapaus Ken ja samanarvoistuvat nykyleikit. *Wider Screen* 3, 2015.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2016) All dolled up, then photoplayed. The fashion-oriented practices of adult doll play in the twenty-first century, *Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style*, 2 (5), pp. 43-62. H

- HELJAKKA, K. (2016a). Strategies of Social Screen Play(ers) across the Ecosystem of Play: Toys, games and hybrid social play in technologically mediated playscapes. *Wider Screen*, 1, 2.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2016b). Toying with Twin Peaks: Fans, artists and re-playing of a cult-series. *Series-International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, 2(2), pp. 25-39.
- HELJAKKA, K. (2018a) "Dimensions of the Toy Experience" Analysis Workshop II: Hybrid Money Games and Toys. In Paavilainen, J.; Heljakka, K.; Arjoranta, J.; Kankainen, V.; Lahdenperä, L.; Koskinen, E.; Kinnunen, J.; Sihvonen, L.; Nummenmaa, T.; Mäyrä, F.; Koskimaa, R. & Suominen, J. (eds.) *Hybrid Social Play Final Report*. TRIM Research Reports 26, Faculty of Communication Studies, University of Tampere, 16–18. Retrieved from: <http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/103277/978-952-03-0751-6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- HELJAKKA, K. (2018b) Re-playing Legends' Worlds: Toying with *Star Wars'* Expanded Universe in Adult Play, *Kinephanos*, 8 (1), June 2018, pp. 98-119.
- HELJAKKA, K., HARVIAINEN, J. T., & SUOMINEN, J. (2018). Stigma avoidance through visual contextualization: Adult toy play on photo-sharing social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(8), 2781-2799.
- HENRICKS, T, S. (2015) Where Are We Now? Challenges for the Study of Play. Johnson, J. E., Eberle, S., G., Henricks, T., S., and Kushner, D. (Eds.) *The Handbook of the Study of Play*, Co-published with The Strong, 381-391.
- HUIZINGA, J. (1992) *Homo ludens. A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press.
- LEVINOVITZ, A. (2017): Towards a Theory of Toys and Toy-Play. *Human Studies*, 40(2), pp. 267-284.
- LORD, P. & MILLER, C. 2014, *The Lego Movie*, Warner Bros, Village Roadshow Pictures, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, The LEGO Group, Vertigo Entertainment, Lin Pictures, Warner Animation Group, Warner Bros. Animation.
- LURKER, E. (1990) Play Art: Evolution or Trivialization of Art? *Play & Culture*, 1990, 3, 146-167.
- MARKS-TARLOW, T. (2010) The fractal self at play. *American Journal of Play*, 3(1), pp. 31-62.
- MARSHALL, D. P. (2004) *New Media Cultures*. Hodder Arnold, London.
- MECKLEY, A. M. (2015) A Student's Guide for Understanding Play Through the Theories of Brian Sutton-Smith in Johnson, J. E., Eberle, S., G., Henricks, T., S., and Kushner, D. (Eds.) (Eds.) *The Handbook of the Study of Play*, Co-published with The Strong, pp. 393-405.

- MILLER, W. G. (1998) *Toy Wars. The epic struggle between G.I. Joe, Barbie and the companies that make them.* Adams media Corporation. Holbrook, Massachusetts.
- MONTOLA, M. (2012). On the edge of the magic circle: Understanding pervasive games and role-playing (doctoral dissertation), University of Tampere.
- RUSSELL, W. and RYALL, E. (2015) Philosophizing Play in Johnson, J. E., Eberle, S., G., Henricks, T., S., and Kushner, D. (Eds.) *The Handbook of the Study of Play*, Co-published with The Strong, pp. 139-159.
- SCHMID, S. E. (2011) Beyond autotelic play. *Journal of Philosophy of Sport*, 38 (2), pp. 149-166.
- SMITH, P. K. and VOLLSTEDT, R. (1985) On defining play: An empirical study of the relationship between play and various play criteria. *Child Development*, 56, pp. 1042-1052.
- SOINI, H. (1997) Mitä leikki on; Johdatusta kasvatopsykologisiin kysymyksiin, 1997.
- STENROS, J. (2015) *Playfulness, play, and games: A constructionist ludology approach* (doctoral dissertation), Tampere University Press.
- SUTTON-SMITH, B. (1993). Suggested Rhetorics in Adult Play Theories. *Play Theory & Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 102-116.
- SUTTON-SMITH, B. (1997). *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press.
- TEGANO, D., W. and MORAN, J. D. III (2015) Play and Creativity: The Role of the Intersubjective Adult in Johnson, J. E., Eberle, S., G., Henricks, T., S., and Kushner, D. (Eds.) *The Handbook of the Study of Play*, Co-published with The Strong, pp. 175-186.
- THIBAUT, M. (2017) The meaning of play. A theory of playfulness, toys and games as cultural semiotic devices (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) University of Turin, Turin.