

Toying With Creative Design: Starting to Design Instruments of Play

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Abstract. The essential elements in building fun and memorable experiences may have to do with playfulness and gaming. The demand for toys among products consumed during leisure time is growing. The toy industry reaches towards new target groups – even adults. A great deal of design research conducted in the past years has concentrated on product usability. But as the experiences toys may deliver not only relate to the usability aspect, attention has to be paid to other areas of user experiences. This paper aims to reflect what should be considered when starting to design instruments of play.

Keywords: Toy, toy design, play, creativity

1 Introduction: Toys as Playthings

The playful man - *homo ludens* – as defined by Huizinga (1938) lives in all age groups. A ‘ludic turn’ is discussed among play theorists. People seek positive experiences and pleasure from activities such as play and games that do not have other purposes than the pure act of playing itself.

Toys can be seen as products of popular culture. They also are a part of the entertainment industry. Thus, the toy industry is part of the creative content industry.

A toy is an object designed for playing purposes for a child, adult or an animal regardless of age or gender. Play is an activity that is carried out either alone or in the company of others. It is something that demands imaginative thinking, creates meaning and pleasure without a need for usefulness. Garvey characterizes play as spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and without extrinsic goals (Garvey, 1993).

Free play without toy objects has different forms, but a toy always offers different stimuli to its user. Toys are even regarded as instruments through which a person accomplishes new ways of thinking and imagining. The toy object makes one become more alert about his or her inner incentives. Toys appeal to the feelings of their user, the ability to understand and the wish to learn.

The proper function of play is never to develop capacities, says play theorist Roger Caillois: Play is an end in itself (Caillois, 2001).

Still, playing is an enjoyable, voluntary, creative and fun activity. Play stimulates curiosity for surroundings, favors communication and socialization, and offers opportunities for the development of creativity and imagination. Fabregat, Costa and Romero point out that 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, 2008) 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).

As stated above, the reasons to play may stem from different motivations. Seeking entertaining experiences may be one of them. But the motivations to interact with *an instrument of play*, in other words a toy, stretch beyond the concept of fun:

One can play without a toy, but a toy object always includes the potential to drive the user to play with it in one way or another. When interacting with a toy, a person may have a silent dialogue with the object, either a development discussion or a relaxing exchange of nonsense talk. What the player takes from their experience with toys, is not necessarily the memory of the toy itself, but the reminiscence of individual play experiences, the stories, called up through their interaction with toys (Ellis, 2006). A toy can thus be ‘read’ as a story. But ultimately, it is the player who will take the story of the toy further in the action of play.

As Sutton-Smith points out, any readings in the history of “play” will quickly show that there is little mention of toys, either in earlier historical times or in cross-cultural studies. On the contrary, play in the modern world has come to mean playing with *things* more than playing with others. So attention has turned, historically, from the social player to the solitary play consumer (Sutton-Smith, 1986).

My thesis is to prove that play is becoming more social again as the experiences of toy objects – toy stories - are shared e.g. through new media.

Rather than concentrating on immaterial play - or playing games as an activity not involving toys, this study focuses on the material dimension of play culture, i.e. use of toys as *objects* or *instruments of play* and *how* they are used/played with. The interest lies in the experiences that toy objects may generate when people interact with them and what designers may learn from these encounters between people and playthings. The toy experiences are thus in the main focus of the research – particularly the emotional and memorable toy-related experiences that bring people happiness and fun and that will make the player's mood good.

1.1 Toys evoke emotions and touch our senses

The appearance of an object, also the one of a toy, affects our feelings (Norman, 2004). Sometimes, a product is the object of our emotion, sometimes the product is the cause, and sometimes it is both (Desmet, 2002).

The study of Cila and Erburg shows that fun objects such as toys are associated with pleasant memories, reminding of past events, experiences of people (Cila and Erburg, 2008). Toys evoke emotions, but there are other qualities that should not be foreseen.

In the realm of physiological senses, the toy experience can mostly be seen as a visual and tactile experience. Visual aspect arises as the most important one as toys first and foremost present themselves as objects of visual culture. The smooth textures of stuffed animals or the feel of a nicely rounded poker playing chip in ones hand remind us that toys should also be investigated from the tactile perspectives of design. Further research is needed in order to understand the importance of aesthetics and tactility in toys. An important question is concerned with how the ideas of toy designers and the experiences of players meet in actual toy experiences.

2 Toy Stories Become Relationships

Toys are meaningful, communicative objects that people form relationships with. Toys are narrative playthings that offer the players the possibility to take their stories further.

According to Luutonen, 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).

Battarbee names products that facilitate communication as 'conversation pieces' (Battarbee, 2004). Toys may be seen as objects which represent these qualities.

As Norman reminds, beyond the design of an object, there is a personal component as well, 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 the meanings they bring meaning to our lives (Norman, 2004).

Toys of today are given personalities and as characters, many of them include a story developed by the designer. Toys truly gain personalities when the player connects the objects with a story. First, the toy is given a name (unless it already has one that pleases the player). Second, it is adopted into the home environment by giving it a place of its own among other possessions of the owner. It becomes a 'conversational piece' - something to communicate with or through, even through a silent dialogue with oneself.

The study at hand concentrates on toy characters, i.e. toys with a face. As Allison puts it, toy 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) *Homo ludens*, the playing human, is, when playing also *homo narrans*, the telling human. Thus, when playing, the players also tell stories to oneself (Kalliala, 1999; Greertz, 1993). The toy user lives through the play experience: First, by being the recipient of the story who then continues or rewrites the narrative and secondly, as being one who connects with the toy object on an emotional level.

According to the study at hand, people collect, play or display their toy activity. Thus, we either play with the toys by giving them personalities or display the toys for several motivations. Or, both play and display our often beloved toy objects. Most importantly, the toys seemingly come alive as emotions are projected on them through collecting, playing and displaying.

3 Players Continue Toy Stories

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 and swing' 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 other words to *express* himself (Piaget, 1962). In a similar way an adult may find enjoyment in expressing himself through showing, or rather, *displaying*, his toys.

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 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 pre-exercising future activities (Piaget, 1962).

When adults make displays of dolls or plush toys in different scenarios or using them as ‘avatars’, the question remains 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 toys reflect on their hopes and dreams on a subconscious level? Are adult players, in fact, using toys as instruments to play out personal feelings? These are questions that I will examine in further research. The aim is to find out, how the knowledge of different play patterns may affect – even benefit - toy design work.

4 Toys ‘Get a Life’

As stated above, one aspect in toy objects that might guide the ways toys are played with are the stories they tell. But how do toys, or rather, the toy designers engage players to interact with playthings?

One possibility to explain human fascination with toy objects is provided by the theory of anthropomorphism: Anthropomorphism can help to explain when people are likely to attribute humanlike traits to nonhuman agents. Norman argues that humans are predisposed to anthropomorphize, to project human emotions and beliefs into anything (Norman, 2004).

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, even objects, through a process of anthropomorphism. 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).

In other words; we seem to need objects to communicate with if we lack immediate human

companionship. Toys, mostly dolls and other character toys with faces and personalities may attract people to communication as they may function as substitutes for pets or even other human beings.

5 Conclusions: Starting to Design Instruments of Play

In the world of design, we tend to associate emotion with beauty. We build attractive things, cute things, colourful things. However important these attributes, says Norman, they are not what drive people in their everyday lives. We like attractive things because of the way they make us feel. *Emotions reflect our personal experiences, associations and memories* (Norman, 2004). The fundamental question for the toy designer, then, is how to draw advantage from this knowledge when designing a new toy?

Also, the toy experiences vary from player to player: As Luutonen points out, the user of a product attaches his or her own meanings into it. These meanings may differ greatly from the ones from the objectives of the designer (Luutonen, 2007). Toy designers should keep in mind that users may all buy the same product, but each product is adapted to life of its own.

Any object can convey meaning. However, as Vihma suggests, some things are more inclined to do so than others. Both the physical properties of a thing and the values given to the thing affect the formation of meaning (Vihma, 1995).

As Fabregat, Costa and Romero argue, in the field of toy design there is still plenty of work required to ensure that the design of toys takes into account the end user (Fabregat, Costa and Romero, 2008).

The element of “wow” is considered as crucial for toys. This element thrills the one who interacts with the toy character may include elements of fun, innovation, new technologies and other interesting features. My question is: Is the ‘wow’ the most essential element the building block of toys which, in fact, ultimately defines the toy experience? How may this experience be designed *into* a toy?

Further research needs to be done to better evaluate which specific elements in toy design constitute meaningful and pleasurable, emotional experiences, the ‘wow’. My aim is to find out whether these experiences are more constituted in the narrative dimensions (toy stories) or the structural elements in toys.

Toy objects may not be valuable per se, but the meanings, time and effort given to these objects increase their value. 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).

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 pointed out, valuable viewpoints for 'toying with creative design' can be found in the areas of emotional design and character design as well as in the field of narrative visual entertainment (e.g. animation and game design). More importantly, to design great new toys seems to mean that the designer has to explore how toys are played with and how their stories are taken further by the players.

Seen in this view, a toy researcher as well as a designer of instruments of play, needs to be a player herself. This is exactly my intention in the next stages of my research – to be both a toy player and a toy displayer in order to understand the underlying motivations – and the curious elements of 'wow' - better.

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