Adult Play with Character Toys

Subjects: Others

Contributor: Katriina Heljakka

Character toys are toys identifiable by name, personality, and visual traits. They represent specific characters derived from or associated with popular culture. This entry explores adult engagement with character toys, or *toy play*, through a multidisciplinary lens, emphasizing playability, materiality, affect, creativity, and sociocultural meaning. Drawing on earlier toy research on dolls, action figures, figurines, and soft toys—those with a face and assigned personality—it considers how adults collect, customize, create stories, and critique societal conditions through toys for personal enrichment, identity work, and community formation. The toy play of adults is framed as a legitimate and complex form of self-expression and cultural participation that intersects with object play, creative fandoms, and political resistance.

adult play   character toys   playability   materiality   affect   world-building

storytelling   photoplay   toyrism   toy activism

For many, adults and toys still represent a curious combination. However, in the 21st century, which, according to Ernst Lurker, a German–American artist and theorist, has been described by renowned scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith as the Century of Play [1], adults have proliferated as toy enthusiasts, "kidults", and toy players [2]. Character toys—action figures, miniatures, plush animals, dolls, and other representational objects conceptualized as character types of toys [3][4]—play an increasingly significant role in adults' lives evidenced by the visual documentation and online social sharing of play of players of all ages, who showcase their toy fandoms and various activities with toys openly [2]. Drawing on findings from research into contemporary toy cultures in Western societies, the 21st century has seen a marked increase in the visibility, normalization, and diversification of toy play in adulthood due to these developments. Adults as toy users have proliferated as creative customizers and storytellers, curators and communicators of toy collections, as well as participants in toy activism. Over the past few decades, social media platforms like Flickr, Instagram, and YouTube have significantly amplified engagement. This has led to photographic toy play and toy-themed videos employing displays, dioramas, and narrative experimentation, manifesting as toy dramas featuring character toys of various kinds. In the past two decades, the rise in adult interest in toys has also become more perceivable through "kidultism," which recognizes adults as consumers, fans, and players of toys with engagements beyond collecting. These ideas suggest that in adulthood, toy play has shifted from the intimacies of homes into public arenas of adult activities and from marginal behavior to a recognized and culturally significant practice.

This entry draws its ideas mainly from the interdisciplinary fields of toy and play research, linking cultural and media studies and research on fandoms with theoretical perspectives highlighted in the areas of design, psychology, market research, and critical theory. Renowned scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith [5], characterizes

play through seven rhetorics, including identity and imagination, highlighting how toy play in adulthood spans cultural, psychological, and expressive dimensions. Consequently, adult play is contextualized not only as a cultural practice and consumer behavior but also as an activity and form of material, visual, social, and digital interaction closely tied to identity work, explained by psychological factors.

While critical theory positions play objects like modern toys as affective commodities with symbolic value within commodity fetishism [6], in traditional thought, scholars of cultural and consumer-oriented research consider objects as extensions of the self [7]. Toys' capacity to function as extensions, again, is grounded mainly in how they afford, suggest, and invite types of play. It is here that the observations and findings gained in research conducted in the areas of toys, adult play, and playfulness, specifically, become more relevant sources informing what adult play with character toys is about.

The motivations and contexts of adult play with toys vary. Adult engagement with toy play is no longer solely framed as nostalgic or deviant, but is recognized as part of the broader landscape of adult pastimes, fandom, and identity formation. Toys form an important medium employed in leisure, learning, and even the work life of adults. Some toy experiences are intergenerational, meaning that they facilitate interactions across generations.

Contemporary character toys represent specific characters derived from or associated with popular culture narratives. They are often identifiable by (brand) name, a backstory, hinting at the toys' personal qualities. Character toys are associated with stories of personalities, social relationships, and worlds, regardless of the transmedia connections that appear across popular cultural media.

Some mass-produced character toys have their origins and connections to movies, television, games, comics, and, today, increasingly, social media phenomena. The connection between toys and narrative worlds is exemplified by historical franchises like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and G.I. Joe, for which media content was developed primarily to promote toy lines. Nevertheless, media cultures, including underground subcultures, inspire toy design of alternative kinds. Some character toys are popular due to their original physical presence and association with designer cultures, and consequently, are known as designer toys and "urban vinyl", first and foremost targeted at adult audiences [8] as canvases for artistic and creative play.

Alongside the subversive designs of urban and underground cultures, contemporary toy research is interested in adult play with mass-marketed character toys recognized to have international and intergenerational interest across toy enthusiasts of many ages, such as traditional toys like teddy bears and Barbie dolls; transmedial toys like My Little Pony and Star Wars action figures; trending toys like contemporary dolls, e.g., BJD or ABJD (Asian ball-jointed dolls); and other characters popularized through visual social media, particularly digital platforms such as TikTok, e.g., Labubu from East-Asian Pop Mart.

Notably, the toy industry also provides materials for DIY creation and customization of character toys through construction sets, such as LEGO, and tabletop role-playing figurines (TTRPGs), which relate to miniaturing [9]. Moreover, DIY cultures associated with, for example, amigurumi plush and doll customization have inspired and

utilized offerings from the toy industry, with commercial versions of crocheted toys and customized Blythe dolls made available, e.g., in outlets such as Etsy. Finally, the category of *designer toys* [8] characterized by Steinberg as collectible art objects in toy form, are created by artists and toy designers producing limited editions that represent another dimension of character toys.

This entry addresses character toys as material beings, leaving out analyses of digital versions of 'toyified' game characters [10], as well as adult "toys" with sexual connotations, instead leaning on physical, three-dimensional, tangible, and story-driven toy characters with an "offline" presence and a connection to play with connotations to object relations and related visual, material, and spatial practices. At the same time, it acknowledges the existence and relevance of digital and hybrid play worlds, to which contemporary character toys are linked due to their marketing, sales, and surrounding social play cultures, in which toy play manifests in various ways. As postulated in this entry, the intersections between character toys in offline and online worlds are growing increasingly complex with the rapid development of digital and connected toys that link to robotics and AI-empowered entities, conceptualized in the research literature as possible and plausible toy friends of the future [11].

Traditional toys, such as teddy bears and Barbies, and transmedial toys like My Little Pony, connect to the licensing market through extensive licensing programs, positioning them as character merchandise that bridges the "icon and object" [4]. As explained by Steinberg [8], this phenomenon can be described as "cultural production and marketing that uses a character (or multiple characters) to generate the consumption of media forms" that operate across multiple popular media platforms. However, these toys are not merely *paratexts* [12], or the material and textual elements that surround and shape the reception of the main text. It is noteworthy to observe how these playthings have entered the market as firsthand, standalone products and primary media, representing the *main* text.

However, as the history of toy design shows, the questions surrounding originality are complex when it comes to character toys as a form of toy media. In contrast to My Little Pony, which originated as a toy line, the commercial teddy bear and Barbie dolls have their roots closely tied to other media, such as newspapers and comics. 'Teddy's bear' emerged as toy companies Steiff and Morris, and Rose Michtom simultaneously recognized an opportunity to create a character toy after U.S. President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt refused to shoot a bear while hunting, with the story captured in a famous drawing by political cartoonist Clifford Berryman in *The Washington Post* [13]. Leclerc [4] identifies the teddy bear as the world's first mass-marketed character toy. Similarly, the origins of the Barbie doll are linked to the German doll Bild-Lilli, created by Reinhard Beuthien, designed as a toy by Max Weissbrodt, and marketed to adult audiences, first appearing in the German tabloid newspaper Bild-Zeitung [14].

This entry focuses on the most commonly known, commercially produced, and mass-produced character toys offered to the market by the industries of play [2] during this century, including the toy industry, and is primarily interested in the relationship between the toys, adults, and their interaction, interpreted here as *toy play*. Leclerc [4] (p. 1) writes: "Character toys mediate play, and as such combine play with storytelling, inviting players to identify to role models, adapt adventures to their social needs and act out their emotional development".

Today, we live in a world saturated with character toys, which are considered meaningful objects throughout our lifespan. Character toys offer a multidimensional resource for players of all ages, facilitating object interactions through their narrative interfaces—they carry built-in fictionality that invites players to extend their stories through play: display, collection, customization, and creative storytelling. Character toys can be positioned in the broader framework of media convergence and toyetic design, highlighting their capacity for emotional bonding and aesthetic appreciation shared by generations. As illustrated in the following, toys offer sites of emotional comfort, creative expression, and public performance, challenging traditional dichotomies between child and adult, play and seriousness.

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