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# From Displays and Dioramas to Doll Dramas

## Adult World Building and World Playing with Toys



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Toys both guide and foster the play—and stimulate the imaginations—of players of all ages. The authors investigate adult use of toys as a point of entry to the world play of both transmedia-connected and stand alone toy characters—dolls, action figures, and soft toys. They point to how adult toy players engage actively in world building in their world play and suggest that play better describes the object relations of adults with toys than such notions as collecting or pursuing a hobby. They discuss how adults use world playing with toys to develop toy industry back stories and replay—and sometimes revolutionize—original story lines familiar from popular fiction. And they highlight how mature audiences for character toys employ these physical objects to explore their capacity for imaginative, spatial, and hybrid world play. **Key words:** adult play and creativity; object play; object relations; photo play; social media and adult play; social play; toys; toy play; world building; world play

### Introduction

**T**HIS ARTICLE EXAMINES adult toy play as a type of world building, which the World Building Institute (n.d.) says “designates a narrative practice in which the design of a world precedes the telling of a story; the richly detailed world becomes a container for narrative, producing stories that emerge logically and organically from its well-designed core” (n.p.).

More often toys are defined solely as objects related to childhood, not as playthings for all ages (Heljakka 2013). Toy play, as a type of object play, has been traditionally associated with children’s use of various physical materials in their play. To many, adults and toys therefore seem a strange combination. A body of research concerned with adult play in such forms of behavior as collecting (e.g.,

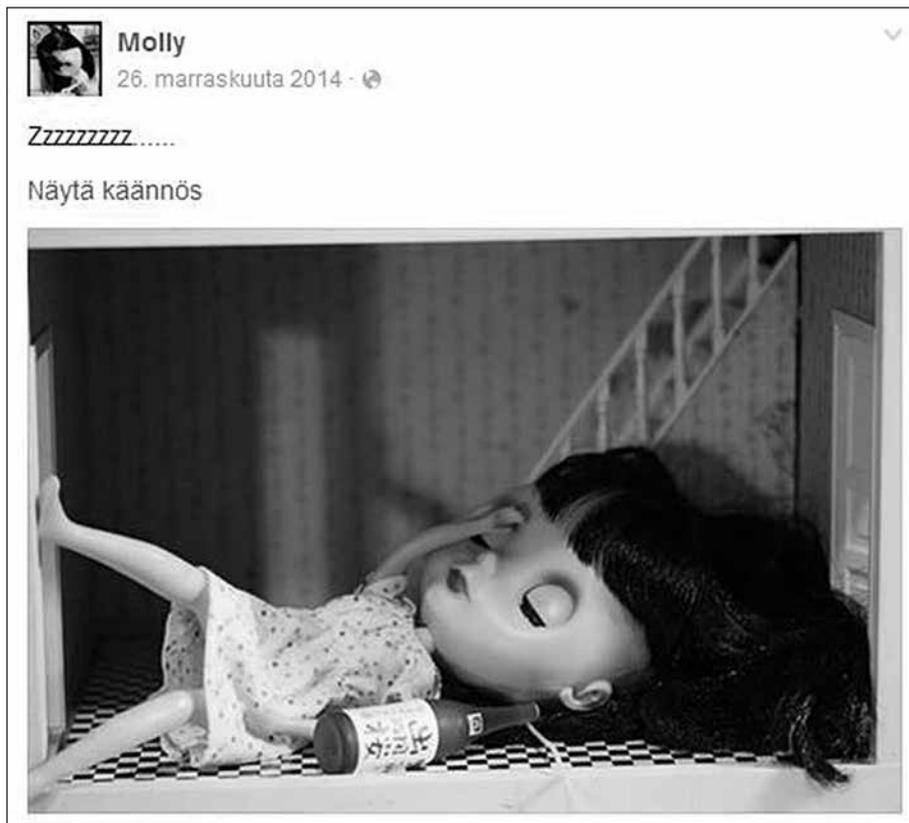


Figure 1. Molly: A doll drama by Blythe player Pinkkisfun, 2014.

Stewart 1984), media play (e.g. in books, movies, theaters, and television, and attending art- and sport-related events (Sutton-Smith 2017) exists, but adult toy play in particular constitutes a surprisingly neglected area of research. Game studies considers adult toy play a subject for investigation, one in constant if sporadic interaction not just with the study of play in general but also of toy play specifically. Yet much of the key research on games and toys has followed Piaget (1962) and focused on the rules that separate games from free-form play (e.g., Suits 1978; Klabbers 2009) or the instrumental uses of toys in traditionally nonplay contexts such as organizational learning (e.g., Deterding 2016).

Adults who acquire toys and play with them have seen their activities often explained as nostalgia, their toys considered objects that merely provoke a yearning for childhood. However, as Stewart (1993) observes, this remembered child-

hood is not a lived childhood but, instead, a voluntarily one.

Discussions of adult activities with toys most often dismiss the play involved and invoke instead collecting, engaging in a hobby, or being a fan of toys. Indeed, play—although identified and acknowledged as behavior involving adult object relations with toys—is usually considered almost exclusively to represent goal-driven activities such as collecting (see e.g., Rehak 2013; Geraghty 2014; Garlen 2014; and Godwin 2015). Moreover, toy play performed by adults—for example, surrounding oneself with kawaii objects (Yano 2013) at an adult age—can sometimes be an act of escapism, and escapism can also be associated with the imaginary worlds of adults (Saler 2012). As a result, escapism joins nostalgia as a disposition that explains adult relationships to toys.

But play can be both autotelic and allotelic (Klabbers 2009), that is something in which we engage for its own sake and something we perceive as creative and productive and, thus, useful. Nevertheless, we think of adult toy owners as consumers of toys that are mostly involved in allotelic play, engaged in goal-driven and serious practices such as hobbies and (selective) collecting. As independent toy shop owner Matt Booker (Langsworthy 2016) puts it, “Adult collectors don’t buy everything. I have a customer that just buys Yoda stuff, another just buys Alien products. They may choose a £300 piece and not buy anything else for another three months” (n.p.).

When it comes to mass-marketed toys, construction toys—which in many cases call to mind the game-like logic of systems for play rather than serving simply as playthings for open-ended play—have notably grown in number in the past few years. If we consider the world building carried out with toys, precisely these construction toys would require immediate attention. Open-endedness in toy play does not mean a complete lack of rules, since the statement “there are no rules” itself implies a rule of sorts, and thus construction toys as playthings that allow world building are systems of play in a way similar to games—even though they permit creative play, they are bounded by their mechanics, unless customized (physically altered) in some way.

Gauntlett and Thomsen (2013) imply this connection when they first postulate that the preferences of materials in reference to playing, making, and sharing could be different in terms of children and adults. “Because,” they write, “older children and adults generally do not want to use the same materials as young children, there is a challenge to produce fruitful tools and materials for older people which still embody the values of playing, making and sharing” (6). “So,” Gauntlett and Thomsen add, “they need more appropriate resources

which can achieve the same effect: these would include electronic systems and online platforms, as well as non-digital everyday tools, such as pens and paper, construction materials, and anything else that comes to hand” (43).

Although there is evidence that children and adults may share the fondness for similar construction toys and world-building toy systems such as LEGO sets, we still should ask how adult employment of the playthings resembles and differs from childhood play, especially when we consider world play. A more fruitful way to address adult object play, then, would be to look at what adults do with toys after they have hunted them down and purchased them as “collected” artifacts. And considering this multifaceted nature of adult interactions with toys will make it necessary for us to include the notion of play, because their engagement with toys in this way involves both a mental predisposition and a playful attitude towards the playthings, that is, their object play includes the physical manipulation of these three-dimensional objects. In Rehak’s (2013) words, “An object-practice perspective brings to the fore the physical artifacts and processes” (28).

Contrary to common belief, adults, besides collecting, also engage in both manipulative and imaginative play with contemporary character toys, or toys with a face, such as action figures, dolls, and soft toys, in multifaceted ways that involve multiplatform play scapes. And one of these types of play is the multidimensional interaction with the character toys that we have been calling world play. Those who do it are world players, as well as world builders. Many scholars have addressed, adult fans of LEGO (AFOL) as “builders.” According to them, AFOLs are known to make and share, but they are rarely acknowledged as players. Instead, their activities with the LEGO system are often called their “creations,” which connotes a more artistic or skill-related attribute to their engagement with this construction toy. Fantasy proves central to the world play of both children and adults, but everyday life inspires playing with toys as well. As Lois Kuznets (1994) writes: “Doll stories may support or subvert contemporary society’s construction of female identity, just as little girls may use their dolls in conformist or subversive ways when playing with scripts of everyday life” (102).

Thus, world play is not strictly adult play. We believe that, in its nuanced forms, it represents a type of play requiring more investment from the players because of its deliberateness, its planning, its use of playtime and continuation of play episodes, its material and technological resources, its self-expression (channeled by narrative creativity), its socially mediated play patterns (such as

sharing of the play on online platforms), and so forth. These attributes do not diminish the play, but rather, enhance it. Keppler (2009) presents the theoretical discussions about autotelic and allotelic play, and Stenros (2015) suggests the ways in which the two are not mutually exclusive.

By interpreting adult object play and world play activities such as customizing toys through the lens of play, we follow Hills (2002), who says “fans [are] players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play” and suggests that “what is distinctive about this view of play is that (i) it deals with the emotional attachment of the fan and (ii) suggests that play is not always caught up in a pre-established ‘boundedness’ or set of cultural boundaries, but may instead imaginatively create its own set of boundaries and its own auto-‘context’” (112).

In this article, we first and foremost investigate the possibility of seeing adult toy play as an activity that also entails the elements of world building related to both imaginative and spatially emerging object play. From our multimethodological study, we offer new evidence for adult world play with mass-produced toys, play which is not necessarily influenced only by the original back stories of toyetic transmedia worlds but which can also originate in the creativity of the adult players themselves. Hills (2002) noted the creativity of the cult fan as a producer, but for the sake of clarity and to avoid euphemisms, we continue to refer to adult cult fans, hobbyists (including builders and customizers), and toy enthusiasts here as players even as we use theoretical arguments that include other terminology.

To understand the world play with toys, we have to take the player perspective into account. We undertook multiple readings and analyses about the manifestations of adult toy play presented in toy photography (including photo play) on social media, such as Instagram and Flickr, and supplemented these readings with observations we made at toy conventions and adult-organized toy play dates. We conducted an extensive literary review, as well as a review of empirical studies (based on close visual analyses of collections and photo play and interviews with mature players aged twenty-five years to forty years and older) about adult toy play with contemporary character toys such as My Little Pony (Hasbro), and such dolls as Blythe (Tomy Takara) and Ken and Barbie (Mattel).

We first discuss back stories, object play practices, and the geographies of play. Then, we turn to spaces dedicated to play, first physical spaces and then those on social media. We then present the illustrative case examples of Ken of

Finland and Socality Barbie. And we conclude with a discussion of how adult world play may be categorized. Using this combination of subjects and methods, we hope to expand existing discourses about the adult use of toys and the ways in which these are contextualized (e.g., Heljakka, Harviainen, and Suominen 2018), and we try to answer the question: How does adult toy play function as world building and world playing?

### **Back Stories as Invitations to Play**

Often, even within the industries and supersystem of play (Heljakka 2013), toys are considered as paratexts (Gray 2010). But in many cases, a toy medium constitutes the original, nonlicense-based media text in itself, as in the case of character toys like My Little Pony or the Blythe doll. Furthermore, contemporary toy characters often come with written, transmedia-tied back stories and both the text-based and visual cues embedded in the design of the toy or its marketing instruments. Just as importantly, the storytelling about playthings has developed alongside the concept of a “total” multimedia marketing aimed at children (Fleming 1996). In the history of toys, most playthings have not had stories associated with them. “Storymakers and toy makers lived in separate worlds,” writes Gene del Vecchio (2003, 142). The back story, or “story-line” as Howard P. Chudacoff (2007) refers to it, means that unlike dolls in the past, fantasy play characters today come with their prescribed personalities and storylines. We consider these transmedia-tied or stand alone traces of information invitations to play that encourage players, rather than merely following the narrative to playful interaction, to enlarge the back story with a world of their own. As Wolf (2012) wrote: “Recognizing that the experience of a *world* is different and distinct from that of merely *narrative* is crucial to seeing how worlds function apart from the narratives set within them, even though the narratives have much to do with the worlds in which they occur, and are usually the means by which the worlds are experienced” (11).

Cabbage Patch Kids and My Little Pony were starting points for what developed into toyetic transmedia phenomena linked to the entertainment supersystem (Kinder 1999). Key to the back stories of these toys were the (brand) names of the individual toy characters. In the case of Cabbage Patch Kids, the dolls came with adoption papers and already chosen names. In interviews with My Little Pony players, we discovered that they kept the ponies’ names as given

and changed them only when they customized an original pony (Heljakka 2015a). My Little Pony players seem adamant about sticking to the original names of the ponies, as one such player, born in 1984, made clear: “[Ponies] never have names [that the player would have given them]. The name [has to do with] the general appearance [of the pony]. It’s a big deal!” (Heljakka 2015a.)

Also, as Christiane Yano (2013) demonstrated when she wrote about Hello Kitty, the personality of the character may, besides its name, be reinforced by illuminating detailed information about the physiognomy as well as its social status: “Exact anthropometric dimensions are details, which provide the materiality that helps make Hello Kitty physically real. Other details such as a kinship tree, make her socially real” (78). According to Yano, these details “layer further dimensions by which a consumer may choose—or not—to engage with Hello Kitty as a personality” (80).

Blythe dolls, on the other hand, despite their original given names, are usually renamed and highly personalized—narratively and in terms of physical alterations—by their owners (Heljakka 2012). Our interpretation of these two strategies is that the original back stories of Blythe dolls limit themselves to the make-up, hairstyle, clothing, and name, but My Little Pony personalities are backed up with much more detailed transmedia narratives or stories—visual, textual, and intertextual in nature. A further case of a toy-related back story worth exploring would involve the Uglydolls character toys, designed by David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim, which originated as a byproduct of a love story between two artists and toy designers. In this case, the back story of the toy (or rather, the series of toy characters) intermingles with the story of its creators. (Two of Katriina Heljakka’s own Uglydolls—Ice-Bats—can be seen in figures 3 and 7.)

In other words, transmedia-tied connections have in many cases only developed after the toy has come into existence. Needless to say, a large number of toys are indeed paratextual in nature, but we argue that there may be more to their popularity than their relationship to a preexisting back story. In fact, the world play potential of a toy depends on its capacity to invite playful interaction.

All narrators insert themselves in natural and social narrations, times, and circumstances. It is not possible to avoid this (Soto-Sanfiel 2015). Toys may provoke conversations between individuals but also silent dialogues with oneself. A player may create any kind of personality for a toy and thus a story for the character. This story may come into existence not only based on the characteristics

of the toy itself, but also through the circumstances players have experienced in acquiring a toy and the adventures they take with it.

### **Mapping Contemporary Object Play**

Adult interaction, creativity, and skill building with contemporary toys (e.g. Heljakka 2015b) are new areas of research concerning object play at a mature age. Such research explores a previously ephemeral but now emerging phenomenon. As Kurt Lancaster notes, the desire to attain a haptic-panoptic (touching-seeing) control over images motivates some fans of media texts (Hills 2002). To explain this relation between objects and their often transmediated images, Sarah Gilligan (2012) has coined the term “tactile transmediality” (25).

Although the aesthetic of a toy (and thus the important relation between its image-based, two-dimensional representation and the actual three-dimensional plaything) contributes firsthand to the so-called “wow” experiences related to that toy (Heljakka 2013), the tactile element of toys forms a more central motivator in any relationship between an adult and a toy. Bob Rehak (2012), investigating Aurora’s creature kits of the 1960s, notes that these construction sets provided “monster fans the opportunity to realize, with three-dimensional presence and heft, the media fictions in which they were invested” (2). As one of our interviewees, born in 1974, explains: “It is so much more joyful when there is something to fiddle with” (Interview with Susanna Mattheiszen, January 20, 2015).

Object play, thus, is interested in both the three-dimensional form of the toy, as well as its transmedial narrativity. Furthermore, Rehak’s “object practices” (noted in Geraghty 2014 and Godwin 2015) include model building, collecting, and customizing. Monsters have remained particularly “buildable” (Rehak 2013). Moreover, customizers try to produce the best version of beloved popular fan objects, says Victoria Godwin (2015). Seen in this light, materiality in combination with the character (i.e. a “personality” given to the toy) plays an important role in the narrativisation of toys with a face. It functions as a starting point for world play.

Often, the activity begins with the collecting of toys and proceeds to play patterns related to displaying them (e.g. Heljakka 2015b). The visual display is complemented by the possibility of a story (Miller 2008). Displaying toys is a highly personal act, but the sharing of the results of these manipulative and

visual scenarios—whether arranged according to size, color, manufacturer, or aesthetics—is considered rewarding. Whereas children create spontaneous and short-lived mash-ups of physical toy characters, often originating in different transmedially presented stories, adults devote time, space, and various materials (including ready-mades and specifically crafted objects) to organize displays, build dioramas, or create completely original and continuous doll dramas for various character toys. An alternative term we might consider is “room box.” However, we find the more common “diorama” a more suitable term. As defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* it describes “a small-scale representation of a scene, in which three-dimensional figures or objects are displayed.” Online, the term extends to representations of outdoor and fantastic settings not necessarily tied to rooms resembling the ones from dollhouses.

Moreover, adult toy play is not only present in the intimacy of a player’s living environment—at the main site of the toy collection and base for display as a site for storytelling—but also in public and social context, both off-line and online. One manifestation of the creativity of toy players as world players is the production of original and artistic narratives. “Critics have also examined how play and art belong to the same realm, a realm in which human beings have the power to create a whole world and the creatures that inhabit it,” writes Lois Kuznets (1994, 7). In fan studies, these worlds are known both as fan fiction and fan art.

The making of fan fiction is clearly a creative practice also partaken in combination with toy activities such as photo play. What Victoria Godwin (2015) refers to as “photo stories” and categorizes as “fannish fiction” has in other research been considered photo play (e.g. Heljakka 2012; Heljakka, Harviainen, and Suominen 2018). Moreover, there is growing interest to “animate the inanimate” through other forms of media play (e.g., the filming of toys or the making of stop-motion animations with them). According to Natalia Samutina (2016), fan fiction, as it emerges through photo-played or videoed toy stories, may be understood as a form of world building. Today, “fan fiction is much broader in its functions and transformative capabilities than it is believed even in fan studies,” writes Samutina (2016, 434). The transformative capacity of the self-documented outcomes of world play with toys follow similar paths.

Central to documented world play, is its relationship to technology and media. In Paul Booth’s (2015) definition, media play described activities “that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media, all the while working within the boundaries of the media text” (15). Mediated

or screen-based toy play—that is, the increasingly present role of mobile technologies in object play—is growing in popularity (Heljakka 2016). The use of technologies such as digital cameras enabling toy photography (e.g. Heljakka, Harviainen, and Suominen 2018) or photo stories (Godwin 2015) and filming of toys characterize contemporary play both in terms of children and adult players.

Sometimes narratives from popular culture strongly direct adult toy play. For example, adult fans of LEGO have built impressive constructions based on environments used in the Star Wars saga and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of books and movies (Botoric 2015). However, as illustrated, world building in the context of physical toys is thought to happen mostly in association with various construction toys such as LEGO bricks or with other types of building blocks, not with stand alone character toys. Adults also take individual toys to public spaces, both to tourist sites and to filming locations, places familiar from television series and cinematic films and photo played to re-create and replay popular scenes from narratives such as Star Wars films. In this way, the cult image in the form of a toy gets "replayed" (Hills 2002, 150) and a "reperforming of favorite stories" takes place (Jenkins 2010). In line with Jonathan Gray (2010), talk about the popular meanings as developed by audiences in adult world play, the plaything as a paratext may also come to be associated with story lines not necessarily present in the original text. As Gray writes, "Granted, the existence of the film or program usually remains a precondition for the paratext's existence, and thus the film or program remains important, but it does not do its work alone, nor will it necessarily be responsible for all of a text's popular meanings" (175).

In this way, the toy relations and activities with character toys such as dolls, action figures, and soft (or plush) toys are used not only to narrate fictive stories related to transmediated phenomena through photo play but also, in some instances, to communicate avatarial relationships between toys and their players (Heljakka 2012). In other words, the toys function as three-dimensional, concrete extensions of player identities. When photo played, the grouping of toys comes to reveal how many kinds of character toys serve the players when they explore identities and more broadly serve the human condition itself. Therefore, creative toy play as a form of object play can take serious forms besides the self-expressive, recreational, and escapist.

In these instances, it is then not mimetic fandom (Hills 2010) that functions as a motivation for the creation of play scenarios but, instead, an urge to play out personal plots resulting from a coupling of the object play practices



Figure 2. A contemporary dollhouse created and shared on social media by Susanna Mattheiszen.

and the imaginations of the adult players. Thus, adult world play with toys entails complex dimensions of interactions with fictional and actual worlds and toy characters, as well as with human networks on social media and in physical play scapes. World play, then, not only includes fictional elements familiar from the practices of world building but involves and engages players with content intertwining the fantastic (toy characters) with scenarios familiar from daily life.

### Geographies of Play Environments: From Imaginations onto Screens

Even though the understandings of what constitutes a plaything today are widening, we should note that toy play, as a form of object play, remains an activity inherently devoted to the manipulation of various physical products, materials, and environments. A play environment refers to the setting in which toys and games are enjoyed (Levy and Weingartner 2003). The toy as a displayed item in

the home represents communication between the toy and the player and the toy, the player, and a possible audience (Heljakka 2013). (See figure 2.)

But we often neglect in these discussions how world play also happens in association with character toys and play with dollhouses, which are still immensely popular playthings in adult toy cultures. According to Jenkins (2004), “a dollhouse offers a streamlined representation which cuts out much of the clutter of an actual domestic space.” However, for instance, by observing the popularity of contemporary dollhouse play, we can see how much creative world play can construct extremely detailed play environments that strive either to be realistic miniature replicas of actual objects and interiors or to facilitate fantastic, spatial storytelling.

In a digital world, however, adult toy play seldom resides only in physical play spaces. It has dimensions that transcend the limits of the intimacy of the home and the materiality of the toy collection and reach out to the public and social spheres of the digital. Consequently, contemporary world players with their toys inhabit both physical environments and digital worlds (Stein 2006).

Interaction with toys can be a pastime exercised alone, but many toy players consider the chance to show one’s toys off to others the more rewarding activity. Often, like-minded toy players and fans also meet off-line to share experiences about the mutual objects of their desire. For example, although the natural world provides a playground to players of character toys—dolls, action figures, and plush toys—the play itself first takes place in the intimacy of homes in the name of solitary play and then moves to online play spaces through documented play. Once shared, the playful interaction continues on the digital platforms of social media.

Imaginatively, adult world play knows no borders. But as an activity employing physical objects, it is mainly mediated through the social web, such as the Internet with all its incumbent social relations. As Wolf (2012) explained, “An imaginary world can become a large entity which is experienced through various media windows” (2). Technology and the possibility to share what has been documented in and through play has attained an important role in toy-related activities (Heljakka, Harviainen, and Suominen 2018). In our understanding, the use of camera technologies and social-media sharing have become an integral part of toy play today (see e.g., Heljakka 2016).

Pictorial, animated, and digitally shared play content is largely visual in nature. So we should note that toy play of the twenty-first century is profoundly visual at the same time it is physical, digital, and narrative.



Figure 3. Play environments for adult toy play by Susanna Mattheiszen photographed by Katriina Heljakka.



Figure 4. Play environments for adult toy play by Susanna Mattheiszen photographed by Katriina Heljakka.



Figure 5. Dancing doll, a scene from a diorama created and photo played by Katriina Heljakka.

## Displays, Dioramas, and Doll Dramas as Spaces Dedicated to World Play

As Schmid (2011) writes, “Although the play world exists in actual space and time, it also creates its own space and time; play is ambiguous. It is at the same time an inner subjective fantasy, and yet it also makes use of objective ontic entities. Players can create their own worlds, of which they are master” (155). Dioramas, or miniature rooms, function as easily transformable contemporary versions of dollhouses, which enable the players to more gratifying photo play. Although dollhouses appear semistatic, dioramas—not unlike theatrical staging created, say, for puppet theater—may appear in a state of constant transformation. Important to the transformations that take place in dioramas is the changing of various props, including small toys, souvenirs, other miniatures, and so-called “re-ment” (Japanese miniatures of food, furniture, and other specialized items).

The manipulation of both objects and skills to create settings for photo play is central to contemporary adult toy play. In addition to acquiring ready-made accessories and objects (e.g., from Asian online stores), many adults are



Figure 6. *The Play of Light and Shadow*, a Japan-inspired diorama (in scale 1:6) created and photo played by Pinkkisfun, 2015.

keen to produce something personal for their physical play environments, often mimicking real environments. For example, Susanna Mattheiszen notes that her dollhouse has an “awful lot of” things similar to those in the rooms of her own home—for instance, an orange kitchen and a red living room. Everything in the dollhouse is self-made (Interview with Susanna Mattheiszen January 20, 2015).

It is also important to note how much do-it-yourself handicraft is involved in the building and staging of dioramas and how often adults find enjoyment reappropriating and repurposing everyday objects or parts of them to create believable settings for their photo play. For instance, as illustrated by an interview excerpt with Blythe player Pinkkisfun, in dioramas and contemporary dollhouses for Blythe dolls (on a scale of 1:6) ready-made objects (e.g. re-ment) coexist seamlessly alongside repurposed and crafted items:

Katriina Heljakka: Are there miniature objects in this diorama [see figure 6] that you have created yourself and if so, what are they?

Pinkkisfun: The walls are composed of tissue paper and wooden sticks, the shelf on the wall is the packaging of a barbequing tool which I have customized to fit the doll house and so is the shelf behind the flowers (that is barely visible). That is a packaging of dates or some other dried fruit which I have customized. I have painted a Barbie fridge with silver color, otherwise [the objects are] re-ment. The flower pot or vase is either a children’s play mug or a bottle cap, I cannot remember which one.

Another example is the spinning wheel installed in Susanna Mattheiszen’s “cosy” dollhouse for Ken and Hector (see figure 8). Commented one follower: “That spinning wheel is divine” (Interview with Susanna Mattheiszen January 20, 2015). This type of world play relates to Wolf’s (2012) notion of details employed in a fantasy that do not advance the story but “provide background richness and verisimilitude to the imaginative world” (2).

### **The Social Web as an Online Play Scope for Adult World Play**

As Wolf wrote, “For many, the desire for imaginary worlds does not change over time, only the manner in which those worlds are constructed and experienced” (4). In adult toy play, the play patterns are sometimes surprisingly similar to children’s play with physical toys. They vary only on the level of complexity of the characters developed, the plots formulated, and the sustained relationships

adults form with their toy companions. Whereas children tend to replace old imaginary companions swiftly with new ones (Taylor 1999), adult relations with their toys seem more long term (Heljakka 2013). In this way, adult activities with toys extend the paracosms of childhood (that is, detailed imaginary worlds created in a child's mind) (see Taylor 1999) to parasocial relationships with the physical signifiers—toys—involved. Consequently, we can justifiably say that the complexity in play correlates with age (Sutton-Smith 1997).

As we explained, contemporary toy players are active both off-line and online. The starting point of all play activities with toys is access—the chance to display them and to manipulate them in various ways. Because many players are increasingly interested also in photographing their toys (i.e., to photo play with them), we can argue for the importance of technologies and social media services that allow them to document and share their play. Inspirational material about toys appears in a constant flow. Blogs, Instagram, and “walls” composed on Pinterest offer seemingly endless food for thought about building and accessorizing physical spaces such as dollhouses and dioramas—or about staging photo play in urban or natural environments. Online play scapes have thus not only become sites that catalogue contemporary toys but also shop windows for the rich and multifaceted play surrounding them (Heljakka 2016).

Susan Sontag once declared, “Today everything exists to end in a photograph” (Hills 2002, 24). In photo play, “the mediated image of a cultural and material artefact and mediated image of a diegetic space” are joined (Hills 2002, 150.). In online playgrounds, people of all ages showcase their stories conducted with character toys and enriched with various props and continuing plots. This creative and productive play, which resembles fan art, sometimes serves as a tribute to existing, popular narratives, but often it challenges the original story. Photo-played scenarios shared on social media include parodies and serialized toy stories. When presented as a continuing story, serial photo play (which in this case relate to photo novels) resembles comic-style storytelling.

Michael Saler (2012) notes that although “rational adults” associate imaginary worlds with escapism, they “devote sustained attention to them, often communally” (4). In addition to displays of toys, doll dramas that are narrated, staged, photo played, and shared involve the creative cultivation of both the physical and narrative dimensions of toys—and, later, even the digital sharing of these documents of play in social media. In this process of sharing, the intimacy of solitary play transforms into performative social play that is at once dialogical and reciprocal. Thus, playing, documenting, and spectating play happens

simultaneously, and for the toy-playing human—adult or child—the roles of the player, author, and spectator coexist and nurture each other.

Through online-based displaying of photo play—and the conversations these doll dramas provoke and generate with the original world player—play becomes a communication between players, and their actions with toys become invitations. Self-documented world play, when shared, functions as an invitation to other potential toy players active in the supersystem of play that manifests both in the realms of the off-line and online sphere. Theoretically, in a Batesonian (2000) sense, this idea reflects play as meta-communication—a mimetic activity that both attracts new players to engagement with toys and other players of them, as it expands the communication around toys among mature players. This agrees with Henricks (2017), who writes: “the ability to join or lead the entertainment of others has become a valued and direct form of adaptation. We might consider this ability in adults as a metaplay function” (11).

Sometimes the play of one leads to more play of others and acquisitions of new toys, perhaps even more toy collecting. Particular, recognized plots played out with toys either in specifically built or natural environments include the mimicking of scenes from television series and films (and, sometimes, even iconic art works) that are photo played and shared. In some cases, adult toy players also travel to settings familiar from filming locations of popular works to photo play with their toys.

Wolf (2012) asserts that “a world is more difficult to encapsulate in a description or analysis than a particular story, character, or situation, making it easier to overlook” (2). When the world of an interface built and organized for play such as a display, dollhouse, or a diorama is tangible, it parallels built worlds in various digital games also considered sandbox games or open-world games such as *The Sims* and *Minecraft*. In these environments, play seems open-ended. When used as staging for photo play, fantastic scenarios are documented. In this form of toy photography, the fantasy is enhanced and preserved. Once shared, it allows the viewers of photo play to step into a magic world that once existed as a compilation of inanimate objects but has transformed into a play world for others to enjoy and become enthralled by.

Modern play seems to have much to do with individualized narratives, notes Brian Sutton-Smith (1997). In toy player practice, this means that the narratives of contemporary toys are being re-formulated in creative, even subversive, ways. Men produce the overwhelming majority of fan parody, but women produce almost all of fan fiction (Jenkins 2006). The need to make parodies

seems to invoke Michael Saler's (2012) culturally notable notion of the ironic imagination of adults that enables "individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths" (14). According to Henry Jenkins (2002), "fanfic and fanzine readers" have been in most cases women. These views do not necessarily apply to everyday toy players in the player category of particular interest for us here—activities with fashion dolls such as the narrativizing of dolls, which are popular both among men and women.

Our two key examples of toys employed by adults in connection with world play are Ken and Barbie, which represent iconic toy characters. They are both dolls produced by Mattel, which designed both as children's playthings. Now both have a cult following among adult toy enthusiasts who are not only collectors but also active players interested in developing the personalities, narratives, and worlds of these characters. In adult toy play, these characters have been employed to play leading roles in doll dramas that challenge, even subvert, the original notions marketed by Mattel and often associated with the dolls—Barbie as a fashion doll and Ken as her boyfriend. Ken has also been seen by some as one of Barbie's accessories (see Attfield 1996; and Unkrich 2010).

Barbie as a material object may not immediately be thought of as a representation, narrative text, or cultural product, notes Pamela Thoma (1999). Nevertheless, the toy may be used in unexpected ways to express ideas beyond its position as an iconic doll. As discovered by MacDougall (2003), Mexican consumers use local standards as the basis for Barbie's character rather than the identity she was assigned by Mattel. For example, they use the dolls to display regional clothing.

The two dolls function as examples of how familiar character toys have been used in world play by adult players and how their play manifests in both the realms of the real and the imagined. One such example is Ken of Finland, a gaudy male doll who loves to wear dresses. Another example is Sociality Barbie, a product of the ironic imagination of an anonymous contemporary player.

### **Ken of Finland**

Ken of Finland (Instagram @kenseikkailee) is a character physically based on the Ken doll but customized by its player, Susanna Mattheiszen, who plays using her own name. The name of the doll is an obvious reference to the homoerotic

art of Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, even though Ken's gender performativity is much less hypermasculine. Mattheiszen's Ken used to live in a caravan, but after meeting boyfriend Hector, he now also has a home in a richly decorated dollhouse that contains many creative and world playing physical objects. "I have made everything in the dollhouse myself," Mattheiszen explains in our interview (January 20, 2015).

Ken wears exquisite dresses made by hand and is photo played both in the intimacy of his residences and in urban and natural environments. Besides using interiors such as dioramas and the dollhouse in her world play, Mattheiszen has photo played Ken of Finland in public spaces not often considered as play scapes. In the Finnish parliament, Japanese tourists followed Susanna and photographed her photo playing Ken. As she noted, about photo playing in the Finnish parliament house, "I was afraid. The environment is dignified and official. Ken travelled through security in my pocket. When at the lectern, I dug him out, I needed to dig him out from the inside of my shirt."

Ken of Finland has thousands of followers on social media who comment on Mattheiszen's stories. The world of Ken has become a social site of



Figure 7. Ken of Finland together with the author's toy Ice-Bat at a crafts market in Kenkävero, Finland, 2015.

interactive adult play. Ken of Finland not only receives gifts from other online personalities, he also gets traditional mail from his fans. As a male doll who escapes heteronormative burdens by carrying his dresses with playful dignity and charm, Ken of Finland surely contradicts Mattel's framing of the original back story for Ken as Barbie's boyfriend. Thus, Ken of Finland presents a plausible example of subversive world play by demonstrating the many play patterns we have described—object play practices beyond collecting involving imaginative storytelling in combination with real human issues; a player-created back story; the employment of displays, dioramas, and doll dramas; and a life communicated through photo play that transcends the boundaries between physical, digital, and hybrid play scapes.

### Sociality Barbie

Our second example presents yet another subversive instance of world play in association with a popular doll, Barbie. Sociality Barbie (<https://instagram.com/socialitybarbie/>) had, in its heyday in 2015, 1.3 million followers on Instagram. During September 2015, Sociality Barbie (also known as Hipster Barbie) had been acknowledged in various publications related to fashion and lifestyle and has since become a social media phenomenon. *Wired* magazine described the doll project as “a fantastic Instagram account satirizing the great millennial adventurer trend in photography. It's an endless barrage of pensive selfies in exotic locales, arty snapshots of coffee, and just the right filter on everything” (Glascocock 2015. n.p). According to *Wired*, the woman behind the ironic photo play, a professional photographer, wishes to remain anonymous. She admits the use of Photoshop in some instances of photographing “#authentic life.” In April 2015, the site reportedly closed down when the identity of the photographer behind the character was revealed (Garrett 2015).

Ken of Finland and Sociality Barbie exemplify instances of world play in which the starting point for the play resides in mass-produced toy characters with manufacturer-created, but limited, back stories. As pointed out by Judy Attfield (1996), Barbie and Ken represent adult dolls intended to be used in children's play. However, as our case studies suggest, adults play with the dolls here, using them as portals to play worlds both physical and imaginative as well as to photo-played and socially mediated displays, dioramas, and doll dramas. As we can see in these examples, the life of the player-developed characters



Figure 8. A scene from a doll drama shared on social media by Susanna Mattheiszen.

does not only live in the intimacy of their players' homes. It actively and socially adventures forth into both physical and digital sites for world play.

Thus, adult toy users do not need to travel to cultish locations to create content for their world play. They are also continuously replaying and ironizing scenes based on everyday life, sometimes replicating familiar, domestic scenarios from contemporaries of the (Western) world. As formulated by Harrington and Bielby (1995), fans are well able to play with and across the boundaries between fantasy and reality. World play with toys at a mature age resides between the real and the fictional, the imagined and the natural world, as envisioned by Saler (2012): "We shall see that imaginary worlds can also attune their inhabitants to be more responsive to others, to the natural world and to human finitude. On the one hand, imaginary worlds are autonomous from the real world, avowedly fictional spaces that provide an escape from a disenchanting modernity into self-subsistent realms of wonder" (7).

The outcomes of spatially multidimensional, plotted, and photo-played toy play of adults employing dolls, action figures, and figurines are therefore also in line with Kuznet's (1994) observations about children's play with narrativized toys. She notes that "both developmental and existential concerns emerge in toy stories" (1). The challenging of back stories, says Henry Jenkins, is a useful disposition when arguing against critiques of toys, which often assume that the play around the fictional narratives necessarily reproduces the original stories

without creating a space for the child’s own imaginative contributions. As Jenkins (2010) explains, “These characters had a life beyond the stories we’ve been sold and told, and what happens next is literally and figuratively in the hands of the consumer.”

### Discussion

As we have said, the world built for the toy depends on its material aspects and how playing with it evolves in the spatial play scapes of the player—both the physical environment and the “geographies of the imagination” (Saler 2012, 4). On the one hand, in adult world play, the building of characters and the development of their personalities are of major importance, regardless of the starting point of their original back stories. They are at the center of the narrative, which may be employed either as a partial extension of the transmedially tied and manufacturer-provided media texts relating to story worlds (as with My Little Pony) or as independently created, fictional worlds detached from or subversively distanced from the original media texts (Blythe, Barbie, and Ken). In short, as we have illustrated, this object play demonstrates both a mental

Mental predispositions towards and actions with toys, i.e. <i>imaginative and fantastic world play</i>	Physical or manipulative actions with toys, i.e. <i>physical world play</i>	Screen-based (digital) actions with toys, i.e. <i>hybrid world play</i>
DISPLAY(-ING)	DIORAMAS	DOLL-DRAMAS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalization of backstory</li> <li>• Imaginative, intra-personal storytelling (doll dramas in the player’s imagination)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customization of physical toy</li> <li>• Spatial storytelling (displays, dioramas, doll-houses) within interiors</li> <li>• Spatial storytelling (toy tourism) in public spaces/famous locations (cult geographies)</li> <li>• Photo play (toy photography)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social sharing of world play</li> <li>• Imaginative, inter-personal storytelling (doll dramas as shared through photo play in social media playscapes)</li> </ul>

Figure 9. Adult world play with toys: different dimensions

predisposition toward toys and actions with them in imaginative and fantastic world play and physical or manipulative actions with toys in physical world play. On the other hand, the world surrounding toys often provides a physical play space in which various plots can be carried out. For adult players with My Little Pony, the desire to world play clearly manifests in the collecting and customization practices around the transmedially tied toy object itself, but the adults we observed in our research who played with Blythe (see figure 1.), Barbie, and Ken players expressed an interest in more subversive practices focusing on character and environmental development.

A further dimension of adult world play in reference to toys may be analysed through an inspection of its spatial nature that asks how it relates to physical space, that is, whether it takes place within a display or a diorama (in the intimacy of the living space), an urban or natural environment (the terrain of cult geography relating to a known media text), a tourist site (in the name of toy tourism), or an anonymous, but public space. Consequently, the nature of adult world play may be explored through these parameters ranging between fantastic and imagined terrains of world building and the actual, physical locations (see figure 8), either anonymous or canonical, in which the world play temporarily resides and becomes documented in photo play or videography, but then withdraws. In some cases, a single, episodic instance of photo play is all it takes to provide the player(s) a reentry to a world that once existed in the physical realm, but now lies only in the image and the imagined.

## Conclusion

As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “It is an old story, and for some a sad one, that in a sense childish toys are more to us than they can ever be to children. We never know how much of our after imaginations began with such a peepshow into paradise” (Gordon 1953, 4). World play for adults provides enjoyment derived from such allotelic dimensions of toy play as creativity, productive play, and personal skill building (Heljakka 2015b). At the same time, it can be viewed as a purely escapist (autotelic) activity, following Chesterton’s idea of the world-playing “peepshow in paradise,” with no goals other than the joys of playing with toys and other contemporary devices such as smartphones or cameras that extend the possibilities of (hybrid) play.

We have explored storytelling in relation to imaginative, physical, and

hybrid world play with character toys and how it occurs both in the imagination of the adult player and in a multitude of play environments. The visceral communication with a character toy proves key when forming a relationship with it—and later, too, when continuing to build up its story world. The role of the toy thus develops from personal eye candy to a multifaceted and socially shared medium. The toy functions simultaneously as a conversational object, and—together with props, backdrops, plots, and documentation—the world the toy resides in forms a device for storytelling.

Solitary, imagined worlds of toys become tangible through world making—displays, dollhouses, and dioramas. When toys are photo played and shared on social media, intrapersonal toy play becomes socially shared interplay in which the imaginations of many toy enthusiasts come to play together. The narratives developed in adult toy play may be based on back stories that originate in transmedia storytelling, but they may also exemplify toy personalities and plots developed by the players themselves. Once photo played and posted online, the stories become sites for world play, common ground for the shared imaginations of human players juxtaposing the physicality of the toy and its built environment with the fictional. These sites depict what happens to the toy and how its personality develops in accordance to world-playing activities and how the hyperdiegetic universe builds up for a toy character alongside the introduction of new events and other toy characters.

Wolf writes that “imaginary worlds are often transnarrative, transmedial, and transauthorial in nature” (14). In the light of the ideas we have presented, we can see how imaginary world play, including toy play by mature players, is “transtoyetic.” This means that play draws inspiration, narrative content, and physical playthings from multiple toy-related media contexts. To clarify, we find it possible on one hand to see toys with different origins, manufacturers, and story worlds used in the same play scenarios. On the other hand, we also think that multiple types of toys may be mashed up in imaginary worlds, staged and photo played, that draw mimetically on plots from the popular scenes of widely recognized narratives such as the Star Wars series (Heljakka 2018). We have come to understand that adult toy play seems to be deliberately more productively oriented and documented than children’s toy play. The dedication to play may not be as spontaneous as with children’s toy play, but it may still emerge as an imaginative and rebellious engagement with toys, one which develops through and results from a simultaneous exploration of the affordances of the physical toys, indoor and outdoor spaces, and the possibilities offered by the story worlds

connected to the toys by their individual, transmedia-based back stories.

Furthermore, from the perspective of imaginative toy play at a mature age, Saler's (2012) notion of public spheres of the imagination as playful spaces that allow the treatment of controversial topics linking to matters of the actual world seems relevant and useful in discussions concerning world building with toys as well. We can justifiably say that children, too, show resistance to canned back stories. But, as illustrated by our case studies, adults resistance and their desire to replay the narratives in connection with toy characters is more open and strategic.

No matter how fantastic are the toy stories as played out by contemporary adult players today in their imaginative visual settings, in the end, character toys—dolls, action figures, and soft toys—are us. They are images of the human being. At the same time, they come with limits to their physicality but with no restrictions related to their capacity to function as ideal and thus often improved versions of ourselves. Sometimes, these toy characters represent the human condition in very truthful, even harsh, terms. However, as Kuznets (1994) wisely notes, they refuse to come alive without a certain playful enthusiasm. They are our fantastic extensions, and for them we are willing to dedicate time, space, and whole world plays of their own.

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