

# More than Collectors: Exploring Theorists', Hobbyists' and Everyday Players' Rhetoric in Adult Play With Character Toys

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## Abstract

The article aims to present, analyze, and discuss the attitudes of the three groups of adults—theorists, hobbyists and “everyday players”—toward play(ful) behavior and activities in relation to character toys. The rhetoric of play theorists is mirrored against the rhetoric of organized players (hobbyists) and (nonorganized) everyday players through in-depth interviews and participatory observation. Questions guiding the exploratory path this article takes include the following: First, what has led to the dominant ideas of the toy as a *collectable* item and of adult toy consumers as *toy collectors*? Second, why is the manipulation of toys that happens at adult age considered *hobbying* and not playing? The results of the analysis indicate that the uses of toys at adult age represent more complex and multifaceted actions and relationships to play than the terms “collecting” and “hobbying” imply.

## Keywords

adult play, collectors, hobby(ing), play(fulness), toys

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## Introduction

For some, the collecting of dolls surely is just collecting of things, but many doll people I know are hobbyists and many are players too. [ . . . ] Nevertheless, many are shy of the word play and rather talk about hobbying, even though what else would the displaying of dolls in different scenarios and storytelling [with them] be to an outsider, than play. There may perhaps not be enough discussion on adult play, [as] many think that play only belongs in childhood. But for me it is funny that if an 8-year-old child changes the clothes of a doll it is play, and if a 48-year-old person does the same, it should not be called play. (Interviewee Tiina, age 32)<sup>1</sup>

As stated in earlier research, adults are increasingly cracking open the doors to their “toy closets” (Heljakka, 2013). Mainly thanks to the advances in sociotechnological developments such as the rise in the popularity of the Internet and most importantly the growing popularity of social media platforms as “playscapes,” we are witnessing a gradually strengthening emergence of the once ephemeral phenomenon of *adult toy play*. Adults are considered the primary audience for artifacts we now recognize as toys, such as doll houses (see e.g., Stewart, 1993), but during the 19th and 20th centuries toys have mainly been acknowledged as playthings intended for children. The romantic notion of the toy playing child has been challenged in the 21st century as toys are increasingly identified as objects of adult fandom (Geraghty, 2014).

As a toy researcher reflecting back on earlier writings on play and playthings, I seek to understand the nature of the rhetoric surrounding both play and mature players in relation to activities partaken with physical playthings such as character toys—dolls, action figures, and soft toys and doll houses. While childhood toy play is mainly referred to as intrinsically motivated or *autotelic* and toys considered instruments appropriated for this activity, adults as users of toys are not understood as *players* but commonly referred to as *collectors* or *hobbyists* and therefore practitioners of a more goal-driven and thus *allotelic* leisure activity. Nevertheless, play as an activity is both autotelic and allotelic (Klabbers, 2009), that is, respectively, carried out for its own sake or being perceived as creative and productive and thus, useful.<sup>2</sup> Again, adults who are identified as consumers of toys are mostly addressed in terms of the allotelic—goal driven and perhaps serious—practices in relation to (selective) collecting and hobbying.

In the ludic—in terms of both attitudes and activities—a more playfully oriented era (e.g., Combs, 2000; Raessens, 2006), the creativity, productivity, and interactivity in connection with adult activities with toys of this type is undeniable, yet often adults find it difficult to categorize their dolls, soft toys, or action figures as *toys*, and rather call them *figurines* or *collectables*. And when they do, there is, in some cases, still refusal and resistance in understanding their actions with these toys as *play*.

Considering the resistance to the phenomenon and possibility of adult play, and even the outright refusal to discuss adult activities with toys as play, it becomes interesting to ask what has led to these attitudes. At the same time, some adults seem to have a more leisurely or casual stance toward their toys. In this way, they present more autotelic attitudes toward their activities, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

I don't understand hobbying that entails performing or goal-orientedness. There are collectors to whom the amount [of toys] is important and that the collection is complete. Hobbying should create joy. If you are distressed, you have the wrong hobby. (Interviewee Hannhell, age 50)

While writings on play often distinguish between adults' and children's toy cultures by referring specifically to "children's toys," speak of adults as toy collectors (also toy aficionados or enthusiasts), or disregard adult consumers and users of toys completely, it is the adults who are known to have been the foremost audience for playthings in their preindustrial manifestations: Writings on the cultural history of toys regard adults as consumers of early forms of miniatures and character toys, that is, dolls.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the toy industry, which represents a professional area within the larger sphere of the entertainment supersystem (Kinder, 1991), a (sub)division of the play industries concentrating on material playthings and an agent in the ecosystem of contemporary play (Heljakka, 2016), mainly recognizes mature audiences of character toys as *collectors*, and not as players. At the same time, many mature toy enthusiasts are using collecting as a rhetorical guise for their play activities, which range far beyond the hoarding of and investment in various toys. Although toy collections are carefully curated and preserved, character toys as a part of larger toy collections also function as objects which trigger adult fantasies and further as an entry point to imaginative relationships with the toy characters. According to Taylor, the relationships with these companions involve a belief in imaginary worlds, or *paracosms* (Taylor, 1999), a topic of study that has not been explored as a parallel activity to adults collecting character toys.

This article explores rhetorical approaches to the intertwining and tripartite topics of adults, toys, and play through an investigation of rhetoric from three sources: play theorists, hobbyists, and everyday players. The study at hand utilizes previous theoretical explorations of play and qualitative interviews with toy hobbyists functioning in an official association (the Finnish Doll and Toy Society, American hobbyist magazine *Doll Reader*, and others participating in formal gatherings organized around playthings). Finally, the author has conducted interviews with *everyday players*, the nonorganized adult toy players, who communicate about their play(ful) activities, for example, at doll meetings and through social media or blogs. By exploring these three perspectives, both theoretical and empirical by nature, my goal has been to study the ways in which adults address activities with toys and whether

or not play is considered to have a role in these interactions. Moreover, what I'm trying to accomplish is to see how the current rhetoric on the toy-interested adult could open up to realizing the possibility of play in activities that are (at best) considered to be *playful* by nature but withdrawn when the topic of play itself is raised.

Although many contemporary objects (e.g., figurines) are rhetorically placed outside of the sphere of play by claiming their status as "collectibles," it is sometimes hard to understand why this is the case. At the same time, the metaphorical dimensions of "toyishness" are vast, as for example, cameras, smartphones, and even vehicles are (playfully) referred to as "toys."<sup>4</sup> In this article, focusing on character toys (i.e., dolls, action figures, and soft toys), collectibles (as valuable as they might be) are viewed as toys.<sup>5</sup>

### Adults and Toys

Adults, for the most part, are the ones responsible for the design, production, and marketing of mass-produced playthings. Also, it is the mature who have power and control over the sphere of play by deciding where and when others may play, what people are allowed/urged/forbidden to play with, and keeping research on toys and play on a leash by deciding on the topics that are worthy of studying. Adults working with toy design together with other adults at toy companies indicate the suitability of a product to an audience of players by formulating target groups and age recommendations, which are communicated on either the packaging or a tag attached to the toy.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is the adults—both on a corporate level and within academia—who are also responsible for how toys and play are represented. What is more difficult to control eventually, however, is *who* will ultimately play with the mass-produced toy and, perhaps even more importantly, *how* they will play with these objects.

To the parent, a toy is something to keep the child amused; abstracted always, instructed sometimes. If the adult intends to demonstrate an action, or participate in any pattern of play, he then will want to share the pleasures of playing, salvaging his own childhood from under the crust of his later experience. (Daiken, 1963, p. 13)

While adults use toys in play with children as the quote from Daiken illustrates, they also acquire, manipulate, and develop meanings to the toys without children, or proneness toward childhood nostalgia.<sup>7</sup> As presented in this article, toys in adult play are engaged in *object play*<sup>8</sup> with playthings acquired at an adult age often through play scenarios involving storytelling. Sutton-Smith notes the role of the individual narrative in reference to modern play (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 105). Different forms of storytelling represent an integral part of the activities relating to toy interests at an adult age: The toy stories of contemporaries are sketched out in various techniques, for example, through displaying, photoplaying, and then sharing of the play on social media.

## Play, Playfulness, and Toys

[Play is] creative behavior that does not end in childhood, or at least I would hope that it does not end. Play is relaxing and makes one forget about everyday life. It does not only belong with toys. I even think of some games and some forms of sports as play of sorts. (Interviewee Tiina, age 32)

Let us now turn our focus to how theorizations on play(fulness) and in this way, the rhetoric of play scholars, make it possible to assist in developing an understanding of the manifestations of adult relations with character toys—the manipulation, narration, and socially communicated actions—as forms of adult toy play.

Play is a heterogeneous behavior category (Dansky, 1986, p. 72): It can refer to a plethora of individual actions or cultural activities. It can include game play, festivals, artistic play, gambling, and sports, as noted by one of my interviewees, “Tiina.” “It can be organised, structured, or rule bound (as in games), or it can be spontaneous, unstructured, and playful as in imaginary free play” (Power, 2011, p. 289). Play can be understood as a peak experience, which involves positive emotions and affect, ecstasy, flow, relaxation and optimism (Burghardt, 2005, p. 9).

Stenros states that “it is possible to separate the mental state of playfulness from the social fact of playing” (Stenros, 2015, p. 64). It is generally accepted that while children are expected to immerse themselves in play, adults can maintain a connection to play by preserving a *playful* attitude. According to Sutton-Smith, the playful is the modern way we idealize play (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 148). Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005) identify curiosity, sense of humor, and imagination as components of playfulness. Their research demonstrates that adult playfulness is “composed of creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity.” What they find missing from this list is imagination, a factor present in children’s play. Again, contemporary play scholars, such as Bateson and Martin (2013), explain playfulness as a particular positive mood state that may or may not be manifested in observable behavior (2013, p. 2). In their thinking, a lot of human play goes on in the mind. If play is more overt, then it is mostly related to children’s play: In sum, we may distinguish playfulness as an attitude and play as a multifaceted activity. Playfulness as a state of mind signals a nonserious, frolicsome lightheartedness of mind, whereas play, and particularly a form of it involving materials, or object play, turns this attitude into many forms of actions, leaving a mark on the participants, play materials, and playscapes.

Then again, Sicart (2014) calls out for *objects* that allow us to be playful. A playful attitude may lead to the *activity of play* once there is a toy (or a game, or a playful environment) that invites us to this type of action. Most importantly, there needs to exist something that triggers our play instinct: A well-designed toy (or other type of playful artifact) or experience may well seduce or provoke and, by doing so,

invite us to play with it and with other people. In order to do so, we need not only the object but also the time to play.

Play as an activity is often partaken during leisure time (Burghardt, 2005) but is not always limited to it. Sociologist Stebbins makes a distinction between *serious* and *casual* forms of leisure (in Suto, 1998). According to Maines, the Industrial Revolution made way to leisure time and in this way opened a larger space in Western life for hobbies, “the work-like play” (Maines, 2009, p. 9).<sup>9</sup> Manninen and Peltola suggest that leisure could be understood as an attitude and mental predisposition rather than something aiming at a specific activity (see Manninen & Peltola, 2007, p. 14). Nevertheless, just like there are different forms of leisure, so can adult relationships and activities with toys be categorized, for example, according to their serious or casual, or unproductive versus productive nature.

### *The Potential Value of Toys for Play*

As shown, the positive qualities of play are widely recognized, but this is not necessarily the case for all the materials that are provided for play. Nevertheless, as Mouritsen points out, toys are regarded as one of the classical media of children’s culture (Mouritsen, 1999, p. 61). When discussing toys it is important to remember, as Hendershot notes, that, “Toymakers do more than merely respond to a market; they also actively *create* that market” (Hendershot, 1996, p. 96). For the industries of play, children represent the firsthand users and consumers of toys, but adults, more often, are considered a marginal group with other kinds of motivations to acquire toys than free-form and imaginative play, most often with systematic, and therefore goal-oriented collecting in mind. Thus, the valorization of play materials and their potential to invite their users of different ages to engage in playful interaction is an ongoing debate among inventors, designers, pedagogical professionals, the industries of play—and the media.

As Attfield (1996, p. 810) notes, instead of seeing toys from the perspective of commodities one should observe how they, in use, are transformed into material culture. One of the ways to argue for the play potential (capacity to invite users to play) and value of a designed plaything is to look at their scale of *playability*. A good toy is considered to have play value, which actualizes when the toy is “brought into life” in imaginative play with motivations beyond collecting.

There is a strong belief that, for example, toys integrated with backstories with transmedia connections diminish creative play (and thus, lack play value) as children are feared only to repeat scenarios presented in entertainment contexts (see e.g., Kline, 1993). However, as Chudacoff points out, “approved” play with toys depends on who defines their function:

“Approved” play is that which follows beliefs, customs, and rules established by adult authority. But children’s manipulation of objects for their own purposes creates true

play value. [...] Toys, then, can and do have dual function, one in the minds of adults and another in the culture of children. (Chudacoff, 2007, pp. 197–198)

Play with character toys is fundamentally an imaginative and therefore creative activity which uses backstories as inspiration but does not necessarily limit itself to them. On the contrary, players of all ages constantly demonstrate their ability to challenge (and even subvert) suggested backstories. Potentially, toys could then be viewed as portals to imagination that serve players of different ages and that carry in them the potential to trigger rich forms of storytelling (imagined worlds and characters or paracosms) in the hands (or the minds) of the players. The play value of a toy is not necessarily dependent on its mechanical perfectness, as sometimes even the “displayability” is all it takes; the toy’s capacity to function as a source of aesthetic pleasure for the player.

Toys, just like any design objects, are given designed affordances, which function in various ways. A character toy, for instance, may be given an expressive face, a huggable or well-articulated body, hair that invites to hair play, or mechanically moving eyes (as in the case of e.g., Blythe dolls). One of the key affordances for contemporary character toys is clearly their poseability, which enables players to display the toy in many different positions. The ability to stand up on its own feet, for example, is important for a doll so that it can be posed and *photoplayed* (e.g., Heljakka, 2013). Contemporary character toys increasingly also include technologically enhanced affordances which add autonomous movement, lights, and sound to the toy. Smart toys afford technologically enhanced interaction between a player and the toy and sometimes connect the toy with digital devices. However, there is evidence that a toy does not need to be technologically enhanced in order to be employed in screen-based play activities conducted by players of different ages, such as photoplay (or toy photography) (Heljakka, 2016).

## Methodology

In *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), the renowned play scholar Sutton-Smith reflects upon various rhetorics on play. In this article, I examine the phenomenon of adult play through a comparative approach on the rhetoric on previous academic literature on play, in relation to the rhetoric of (organized) toy hobbyists and “everyday” (nonorganized) players. The focus is on the question of how the topic of adult play is addressed in utterances made by three different groups of actors: theoretical formulations of play scholars, and the comments made by adult toy hobbyists, and everyday players.<sup>10</sup> The rhetoric of play theorists is mirrored against the rhetoric of hobbyists and everyday players through in-depth interviews and data collected in observations carried out at doll meetings and toy conventions.

In all, my methods included an extensive literary review on the theoretical formulations of play, archival research and textual analysis of publications such as the American hobbyist magazine *Doll Reader*, analyses of toys and social media

(blogs, Instagram and groups devoted to them on photo management application Flickr), and finally interviews (conducted face-to-face and via e-mail) and observations with what I refer to here as organized (hobbyists belonging to the Finnish Doll and Toy Society) and nonorganized, Finnish everyday players who are not affiliated with any organization of this kind. Altogether, I conducted six in-depth interviews in 2015–2016; three with members of the Finnish Doll and Toy Society and three with everyday players (all female) present and active on social media: Flickr, blogs and Instagram. The interview questions explored the toy relations and activities of the interviewees born between 1965 and 1986.

By turning to these materials, the aim was to investigate the rhetoric around the playthings and the activities adults partake in with them. Of particular interest was to scrutinize how the interviewees position themselves in relation to collecting, hobbying, and play. The intention here was to emphasize the importance of the relationships between toys and different groups of users who are identified, on the one hand, through the use of the frameworks of collecting, hobbying, and play, and, on the other hand, the adult toy player types profiled in earlier research: collectors and everyday players, excluding those with a professional motivation to manipulate toys, that is, the “toying artists” and toy designers (Heljakka, 2013).

## **Rethinking Play-Age: Adults and Toy-Related Activities—Three Approaches**

Most adults look at children’s toys with a kind of amazement at how they can be preoccupied so well 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, p. 156)

According to *The Economist*, the future of the toy industry, more than anything else, is affected by two lines of development: One of them is the expansion of the toy playing audiences and the other the change in play culture that is reinforced by technological developments. According to the statistics from 2011 published in the newspaper, in Japan, 23% of all toy purchases were made by adults for themselves. In 2012, the corresponding percentage in the United States was 3.5% (Schumpeter, 2013).

### *Toys, Scholars, and the Industry: Toys and Collecting*

The children and young people have fun playing with the dolls and toys and adults have fun with them too, calling it collecting. (Axe, 1981, p. 34)

What, then, has led to the dominant conception of the toy-interested adult as a collector? One possible answer to this question may be the tendency of adults to

consider their play activities from the viewpoint of serious, goal-oriented play forms such as collecting than more leisurely, imaginative play. A comment made by Axe in an article featured in hobbyist magazine *Doll Reader*, illustrates well the typical choice of the rhetoric of adults use in association with playthings.

Maines notes that “collectors and connoisseurs are necessary for preserving evidence and drawing public attention to the history of artifacts” (Maines, 2009, p. 132). Besides being a source for historical information for the use of artifacts of the past, collectors are also present in the current rhetoric regarding adult relationships to toys. For instance, global toy giants such as Mattel and Hasbro recognize the existence of the adult player but refer to him or her as a *collector*. Moreover, adults seem to constitute a significant audience for LEGO, but they are not referred to as players but in rhetorical terms that are often situated outside of play—as collectors and *builders*:

Adult Fan Of LEGO or AFOL refers to those adult hobbyists who build with or collect LEGO. Quite often these people played with LEGO as children, went through what are called dark ages, in which their interest in LEGO waned, but then regained their enthusiasm for the hobby. (Adult Fans of LEGO, 2015)

The toy industry faces rules and strict regulations on how to categorize players according to their age because of safety issues. Nevertheless, it is still interesting, how possible mature audiences for toys with less fears of using toys in ways that are not safe, are still for the most part addressed only as collectors, for whom expensive, displayable collector’s editions or series of toys are produced and marketed.

Even though adult play is emerging as a more recognized phenomenon in the time of the ludic turn and represents a form of behavior that has positive effects, toy purchasing and adults who use toys during leisure are still a minority in relation to other groups of players, such as gamers. As comics scholar Beaty articulates, “The products of mass culture, and the audience for it, have, indeed, been frequently dismissed as childlike, but this particular form of infantilization is also importantly classed, gendered, and racialized” (Beaty, 2012, p. 22).

Adult enthusiasm toward games and digital games in particular no longer carries the same stigma of oddness or label of an infantilized pastime as a similar interest for toys (or, toyified characters) still seems to do. For example, as explored by Yano in the case of Hello Kitty enthusiasm, extreme fans of the character “are familiar with the snide glances and overt scorn of other consumers and nonconsumers alike who are critical of such Kitty-based excessiveness, especially over what some interpret as a mere child’s toy” (Yano, 2013, p. 121). When considering the line of character toys with the biggest following of all times, namely, Star Wars toys, the understanding of the “collector” rhetoric prevails, as the possibility of play is suppressed:

Author: How consciously are new Star Wars toys developed with the adult player in mind?

Howard Roffman      The adults would certainly not admit to playing with the toys.  
 (Lucas Licensing):    When the products are right for kids, the products are also right  
                                  for adult collectors.<sup>11</sup>

According to the comment made by Roffman, it becomes possible to see how the potential play value of a toy, then, may be considered to function similarly for different age-groups.

In earlier studies, I have profiled adult toy players in four subgroups: collectors, artists, designers, and everyday players (Heljakka, 2013).<sup>12</sup> Collectors are interested in creating a collection but doing so based on their own motivation and principles. Often, toy “enthusiasts” (in their own wordings) identify themselves as collectors. The toy collecting adult is a recognized, cultivated, and most widespread term used in reference to these mature toy enthusiasts of the Western world. The possible reasons for this may be that first, the goal-oriented quality of collecting is an easily understood aspect of adult toy activities—also for the media. Second, it is the tangible dimension of the toy collection in itself that is comprehensible in terms of volume and communicable to an audience through, for example, photographic evidence. Collecting as a formalized type of play behavior, a subcategory of object play, can be further categorized in terms of its aims (See Note 5).

The toy industry recognizes collectors as the mature audience for toys, who are expected to invest in collector’s items; often more expensive, more limited, and in many cases more fragile toys. Still, as one of my interviewees demonstrates, adults are interested in the collecting and ownership of economically priced toy items as well, “At Easter, we ate 55 Kinder Surprise eggs [with my husband] just to have a complete series of Barbapapa collectable figurines” (Interviewee Susanna, age 40).

Neither do adult activities with toys limit themselves to solitary collecting. When the joys and excitement of collecting are shared on social media, the toy activity shifts from a solitary object play practice to a social one and transcends the limits of the domestic sphere into the realm of a public playscape. Thus, as illustrated by interviewees Liilii and Tiina in the following, the collecting of toys has many dimensions—joyous and “serious,” solitary and social:

For a collector the “hunting” for and joy of finding things, the sharing of one’s collecting with other collectors, for example, on Facebook groups is important. It is important to own curiosities, the harder it is to get one and the more perfect its condition, the more valuable it is to the collector. (Interviewee Tiina, age 32)

What belongs to collecting, besides acquiring (buying, trading, finding) is, for example, the “flickering” of [websites] online stores without the intention to buy, the so called dreaming and planning of extensions to the collection. The organizing and displaying of the collection may play an important part. Collecting also implies that knowledge about the subject of the hobby is sought. It can mean functions within an organization and other [forms of] social interaction around a common point of interest. (Interviewee Liilii, age 41)

## *Toys and Organized Players: Toys as a Hobby*

I think of myself more as a doll hobbyist than a doll collector, as it is not important for me to keep the doll in its original shape, [nor am I interested in] the monetary value of the toy, or the collecting of a large collection. I am content with a few dolls of the type that I'm most attracted by. A collector reminds me of a person who wants to have a perfect collection of a certain type of artifacts to "stand on ceremony" and does not want to touch them after that. (Interviewee Tiina, age 32)

As illustrated, the most commonly recognized, publically approved, and toy industry-acknowledged form of adult toy play to this day is collecting, that is, systematic acquirement of playthings. Organized players in the realm of toy-related associations are not typically addressing their activity as play, nor necessarily collecting, but as a *hobby*. Again, hobbying may also be used as a term that includes aspects of both autotelic and allotelic play as postulated by my interviewees "Lioli" and "Sylva":

I see hobbying sort of an umbrella term, which encompasses play and collecting. Hobbying is also sort of an euphemism to playing. If one is embarrassed to admit of being an adult whose actions include playful elements, one can always say to have a hobby with this thing [dolls and toys]. It sounds in some way more appropriate as an adult pastime. (Interviewee Lioli, age 41)

As a child, I have collected toys at the time when I still played with them, so playing and collecting at least do not close each other out. Hobbying is perhaps a little more holistic than mere collecting, perhaps a little more social. (Interviewee Sylva, age 30)

Even in the utterances of organized toy enthusiasts the possibility of play is avoided by using euphemisms and calling their activities "hobbying" or "dollying." Although *hobbying*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), denotes an "individual pursuit to which a person is devoted," it does not do justice to the rich and multifaceted cultures of adult toy play. What distinguishes collecting toys from hobbying with them is, according to interviewee Sylva, a solitary, enjoyable function, whereas hobbying entails a social aspect, "In its most simple form, I assume it [collecting] is just buying and ownership. I think of these as the most central functions. Hobbying does not need to be social, but it can be. [Hobbying is] Something nice to do for the fun of it" (Interviewee Sylva, age 30). In this way, the thinking of Sylva parallels Sutton-Smith's take on hobbies:

*The rhetoric of the self* [...] is usually applied to solitary activities like hobbies [...] These are forms of play in which play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players—their fun, their relaxation, their escape—and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances. (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 11)

“The interaction with other [toy] people is important,” says Susanna. (Interviewee Susanna, age 40) Although the sharing of one’s toy activities is considered important, as illustrated by Susanna, the pleasures of creating a toy collection; searching and hunting for, and the gathering of toy objects do not, however, end with the acquisition, nor the sharing of the toys, but in many cases continue with activities built around their play value—the visual and material affordances of the toy. As interviewee Tiina points out, “for a hobbyist the value of the doll or its rarity is not so important, but the doll itself and what you can do with it” (Interviewee Tiina, age 32).

It is here where the question turns from the collectability of a toy series to the *playability* of these objects and to other play activities apart from the allotelic functions of building a collection or simply sharing it online. In other words, the term *hobbying* can be used as a guise for creative object play, such as *photoplay*:

It is important to me that the outcome of my toy photography [shared on social media, such as Instagram] is good and not unimaginative or ugly. (Interviewee Susanna, age 40)

Maines points to the creative control of hobbyists, which is both full and unchallenged (Maines, 2009, pp. 4–5). The relationships adults have with their toys extend beyond the activity of collecting, and manifest in multifaceted cultures of creative storytelling: customization, photographic and videoed toy narratives. An analysis of the rhetoric in the hobbyist context shows, however, that other terms are used when referring to activities that could equally well be described as creative play patterns:

Dolls and toys, for me, are decorative items at home, peaceful items [which] I look at on a daily basis and when the time allows, I also try to photograph [them], come up with stories for the toys. What I like is that some toys and dolls have to do with memories if I have received one from a friend, or I have like-minded friends who develop stories with similar toys. (Interviewee Hannhell, age 50)

I take photographs of dolls, I most like to do it outdoors. For a time I was trying to build a 1:6 scale doll house, but for the moment I have simplified my hobby by just letting the dolls live on the top of a shelf. I share the doll photographs in Flickr in groups related to Blythe [a doll type] or other toys. (Interviewee Liolii, age 41)

The motivations adults have for using playthings in their leisure reveal the playful aspect of their activities: According to the ideas related to play, such as a certain kind of anarchism and creative appropriation, the adult, just like a child, is interested in reinterpreting and cultivating the meanings of their toy characters: “modding,” role-playing, and narrativising them. This way, they come potentially to treat the meanings given to the toy by its manufacturer in a subversive manner. For example, Spigel notes that for instance in the case of Barbie, the meanings or values given

to the doll by its collectors do not correspond to the original meanings attached to it by its manufacturer, Mattel (Spigel, 2001, p. 312).<sup>13</sup>

### *Toys and Nonorganized Players: Toys in Play*

I like to play with dolls myself and I feel wonderful about just grabbing a doll and brushing its hair and be completely unproductive. [...] at some point it was really difficult for me to [sleep at night...] Then I begun to decorate one of my smaller doll houses and [when] decorating it in my mind [as the dollhouse was still unfinished], I finally found the perfect arrangement for the furniture and slept well afterward. (Interviewee Pinkkisfun, age 40)

Adult object play demonstrates both multifaceted imaginative and goal-oriented activities, in which materials are manipulated, reappropriated and creatively cultivated. One of my interviewees, Susanna, has acquired one Barbie with an investment in mind but has since “released” it from its position as a collectible, “It is so much more joyful when there is something to fiddle with,” she says (Interviewee Susanna, age 40), making a similar point to object play as made in Pinkkisfun’s comment above. In this way, the objects adorned in adult toy relationships are not only decorative artifacts acquired for the sake of visual gratification or ownership but also represent things of play that inspire and challenge adults to a creative manipulation of materials and skill-building in reference to toys (Heljakka, 2015b).

While collecting can be seen as a play activity in itself, the playful manipulation of toys include other object play patterns such as displaying, dressing-up, customizing (and otherwise crafting), creating stories (through e.g., photoplay and stop-motion animations), “world-playing” (creating displays, decorating doll houses, and scripting doll-dramas) and toy tourism, that is, traveling with toys.

Maines notes that hobbies allow a sharing of the product (Maines, 2009, p. 123). Apparently, so do adults who conduct activities with character toys:

Playing is important to me! My childhood play ceased very late. By using the caretaking of my little sister as a guise, I played freely with my Lundby dollhouse up to my highschool years. In my 30s, the interest toward the world of toys awakened after a break. I do think that the dressing of my fashion dolls and the displaying [of them] for photographs is purely and honestly play. It is fun to have feedback for photographs on Flickr. [...] The interaction with others who are interested in fashion dolls is a crucial part of this thing. I would like myself to have more “play moments” and sharing IRL [in real life] with others who have gone crazy. (Interviewee Liioiii, age 41)

Toys, seen in this light, are socially shared objects not only at “play dates” or toy conventions, but also in the sense that the play experiences around them are enhanced further when fan fictions involving, for example, photoplay or play memes are showcased and circulated on social media platforms. When shared, these

gestures often become invitations to play that attract new players to acquire toys for themselves and become involved in the “game.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions: Toward New Understandings of Adult Toy Play

Never before have I felt like being an adult. Now I do. It’s a completely new feeling for me. Fortunately, it does not restrict me from playing with my toys. (Susanna Työhuone, blogpost, 2014)

In this article, I have asked what has led to the dominant idea of the toy as a collectible when acquired by adults, and why adult activities with toys are considered to be hobbying and not playing. One way to understand the prevailing motivation to see character toys as collectibles is to address their potential to serve the allotelic, that is, more structured, goal driven, and sometimes more serious forms of play, based on an interest to create a “complete” collection. The tendency to refer to toy activities as hobbying and not playing, again, connects mostly to how these less systematic, “fun” and social activities take place during leisure. Nevertheless, both aforementioned ways of addressing uses of toys at an adult age fail to see the toy playing adult as an agent involved in creating imaginative play scenarios with toy characters.

I have proposed a distinction to be made between the organized players—for example, the hobbyists affiliated in various toy-related organizations—and the everyday players without such an affiliation, who present different motivations to conducting activities with their toys. Another distinction to be made here is that not all adult players are interested in acquiring limited editions of collectible items. On the contrary, ludic gratification may also be found in play concentrating on single toys. As my research materials illustrate, even if a toy represents a well-known brand, it may carry significance for an adult for reasons that stand beyond its transmedia-spread and commercially narrated dimensions, as is the case with Susanna and her Ken doll: In this relationship Ken does not represent Barbie’s boyfriend but a toy character who has the agency and potential to function as a spokesperson for gender equality.

The playability of a toy is, in other words, not necessarily synchronous with its collectability. Its rarity, specifically adult-oriented design or high cost do not necessarily echo the ways the toy is appropriated or appreciated in adult play.

There will be a rhetoric of ludicism in the future, Sutton-Smith predicted in his *Ambiguity of Play*, published in 1997 (p. 149). Surely, this ludicism transcends artificial boundaries created by society in order to neatly package and categorize what is appropriate to play with at each period of human life. Play as a transcultural and transgenerational phenomenon cannot be tamed to serve only specifically limited target groups through playthings designed for particular audiences. As illustrated in this article, an adult may be intrigued by a toy primarily intended for

younger audiences, such as the Ken doll. Furthermore, children may find the so-called collector's items, for example, fancy versions of Barbie, fascinating.

As the outcomes of my analysis of the rhetoric on adult interaction with toys demonstrate, the terms—collecting, hobbying, and play—are sensitive to evaluation. When adults, as in many cases, the unexpected consumers of playthings enter the picture, the rhetoric is steered toward more serious and allotelic terrains of play(ful) behavior, such as collecting. This is to say that if toys, primarily understood as the things for play, are moved away from the play-workers of society—the children—they are often stripped of their inherent idea as objects that trigger casual forms of ludic interaction and function as the instruments of imaginative and autotelic play.

The perspective taken in this article has been to present adult activities with toys as a form of leisure in which collecting, hobbying, and play have been considered the most active features. What has been key in analyzing the rhetoric of play scholars, organized and nonorganized adults admitting to relationships, and activities conducted with toys, has been to examine their willingness to include the notion of play in their rhetoric. The intention here has not been to force the phenomenon of play on the adult users of toys. Rather, the interest has focused on how the rhetoric around adults and toys often hints at the possibility of (e.g., joyous, imaginative or relaxing) play but still more often finds ways around it by referring to other qualities of the activity, as in the case of Sylva who only sees the possibility of regarding her actions as play, while framing the thought with humor, “I think of play as a pastime for children, but in humorous terms also call my own toy hobbies playing” (Interviewee Sylva, age 30).

The rhetoric that circulates around play(fulness) in connection with adult object play with toys can in terms of this study be interpreted as biased: On the one hand, the dominant way of framing adult activities with toys is collecting. On the other hand, the play element is in some cases recognized as a part of a toy hobby. The adults interviewed for this study take a stance toward the collecting activity as more serious than casual and more goal driven than imaginative. Toy industry representatives and hobbyists both use similar terms in speaking of the activity and seldom do these wordings articulate straightforward references to play. “Play” in humorous quotation marks, is as far as many dare to go when referring to adults and their toy activities. Still, for many, joy, awe as well as visual and imaginative pleasure, are what some of us seek in the toy, as illustrated by the interview excerpts presented in this article.

When comparing the academic rhetoric concentrating on the positive features of play with contemporary consumerist rhetoric on playthings, we may come to see a discrepancy between the generally positive attitudes toward autotelic play and toys as objects that are mainly addressed, in the adult context, as collectibles and therefore deprived, at least partly, from their function as *playthings*—as products intended to be used in casual and free-form types of play, such as imaginative and creative storytelling often associated with children's toy play.

In the presented ideas of Burghardt (2005), Bateson and Martin (2013), and Guitard et al. (2005), play and playfulness are considered to have many positive effects on human life. Although many have formulated that the general spirit of the contemporary times is ludic, it seems that adult toy players (while coming out of their toy closets) are not altogether comfortable with stepping outside of the somewhat serious framework that the (toy) collector label implies. As collecting refers to an allotelic, or goal-oriented and perhaps a more serious play activity, often with more calculable than imaginative investments in mind, it helps a toy enthusiast to keep a safe distance with the uncertainties inescapably connected with free-form and imaginative play. On the other hand, if toys as the objects of leisure and pleasure in hobbyist uses are castrated of their inherent *raison d'être* the moment they are introduced to an adult audience, it is pertinent to ask why this is the case. Sometimes, however, as my interviewee Hannhell notes, the collecting dissolves into play without one noticing:

For me, all of them [collecting, hobbying and play] go together. It is nice to notice that many other collectors play without noticing when they photograph and display their toys. One can bring play into collecting through how toys are arranged on a shelf and through the [imagined] interaction between them. (Interviewee Hannhell, age 50)

What the empirical findings presented in this article tell us is that in the ludic era, adult owners of toys are more than collectors. In conclusion, character toys no longer represent artifacts connected only to childhood or the realm of collectibles but also need to be recognized as a category of objects belonging among adult-owned, cherished, and creatively appropriated cultural artifacts—instruments which invite us to many forms of play.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author functioned as chairwoman for the Finnish Doll and Toy Society between 2014 and 2016. However, the author was not functioning as chairwoman any longer nor active in the board when conducting the research (qualitative interviews with the “organized players”).

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### Notes

1. The author has translated all quotes from Finnish to English. The interviewees have given their permission to use either their name or a pseudonym in reference to the interview materials.

2. In this way, it is possible to distinguish between playful and more serious play. Even though hobbies are often thought of as productive in nature, they too should be considered autotelic: Maines writes that "... for true hobbies, the leisure theorists tell us, the motivations and satisfactions must be at least primarily intrinsic; they must be, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz tells us, 'deep play'" (Maines, 2009, p. 9).
3. See, for example, Stewart, Susan (1993) *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
4. I propose that *toyification* communicates the idea of an entity being reinforced with toyish elements/aesthetic; an object, technology or a technological device, a character or a human being acquiring a toyish appearance, form, or function through intentional behavior.
5. It is important to note that the activity of collecting may even be understood as a *form of play*. Here, my thinking parallels the ideas presented by Rogan who states that "collecting is much more than a matter of distinction and social emulation. It is also fun and play [...] collecting is a process where the ludic aspect is clearly present" (Rogan 1998, pp. 44, 47). At the same time, it is possible to claim that collecting represents a more autotelic (and serious) form of play than creative actions partaken with a single plaything.
6. Age recommendations on playthings are partly communicated because of safety legislation. On the other hand, to compare, for example, board games may be targeted to players aged 5–99. However, board games differ from many other types of playthings in that they have been accepted as generators of play experiences for adults as well. For example, the "family game night" as a popular industry slogan leans on the idea of a board game as a focal point for transgenerationally shared ludic interaction.
7. The interviewees were asked if they have children of their own and one of them responded yes. I also asked what kind of toys the interviewees liked to play with as children. The data point to that adults are mostly interested in playing with contemporary toys instead of old playthings associated with childhood nostalgia.
8. In this way, adults as an audience for toys are not only interested in the ownership or the toys' functions as "eye-candy": In most cases, collectors demonstrate manipulative activities around toys that resemble variations in *object play* as formulized in theories on infant and animal interaction with play material (e.g., Smith, 2010). As an example, a study carried out by Manninen and Peltola (2007) points to the interest of adults in object play: doll house enthusiasts also refer to themselves as *miniaturists*, *hobbyists*, *makers*, *artists*, *crafters*, and *tinkerers*.
9. According to Hannah Arendt, the thinking that work and play are opposites and that everything that is not related to earning a living is a hobby rooted in the transformation of thinking about how labor and work are conceived (1958, pp. 131–132, cf. in Stenros, 2015, p. 55).
10. I have chosen the term *everyday players* to refer to adults who do not have a professional, nor artistic motivation to manipulate toy objects. Moreover, this term (which at the same time represents a rhetoric construct in itself) distinguishes adults who do not acknowledge themselves as collectors and who are interested in their toys for reasons other than seeing them as investments.

11. 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).
12. It is appropriate to make a remark here: Also, what is said in scholarly contributions on this subject carries with it possible, even probable rhetorical accentuations that are not necessarily neutral.
13. For example, my interviewee Susanna has approached Mattel to ask if she may use her Ken for a campaign for gender equality. The toy company didn't approve the use of the doll in this way (Interviewee Susanna, age 40).
14. I have learned that it is possible to see game-like patterns emerge in toy play, once shared visually and communicatively on social media. See Heljakka (2015a).

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