Disliked and Demonized Dollies: Pediophobia and Popular Toys of the Present

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This study explores the phenomenon of pediophobia and popular character toys of the present day. Pediophobia, or, the fear of dolls, is a common reaction when discussing character toys with adults. By turning to a combination of various research materials concerned with popular toys, their characteristics, and the audiences who dislike and dismiss them such as previous research papers, media texts and interviews with adult toy players, my aim is to locate the joint phenomenon of the disliked 'dollies' and pediophobia in popular culture, the currently communicated reasons for it, and the strategies for avoiding encounters with the 'dislikeys'.

Image 1. “Dolly, don’t look!” Photoplay by the author, 2018 assisted by Sara Petrucci.

Introduction

In the summer of 2016 I participated in an urban art exhibition called Hidden Art as an artist with a colleague. Together, we designed and set up a gamified art exhibit, featuring a photoplay (or story including toy photography) of a girl we had named Sigrid (Heljakka & Ihamäki, in press 2018). The character toy, who I photographed for our narrative – a MakieDoll – was partly designed by myself through an online application, then fully 3D-printed by MakieLab, a toy company based in Britain that was effective 2014-2016.[1]

1 Once deciding upon the facial features for the doll, I always aimed to design her to look like me, to function in an *avatarial* manner (Heljakka, 2013, 351). Consequently, the doll sported a serious face without any connotations to the bright smiles of contemporary fashion dolls like Barbie or Bratz. However, I wanted to give my new toy friend long blonde tresses, like I had at the time myself. After having anticipated the arrival of my mini-me for a month or so, the cylindrical, black box finally arrived. Little did I know that the hair style I had chosen for the doll resembled very little my own hair style. In fact, to my shock, the plaything looked rather like the malevolent character from the horror film *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004). Quickly, I arranged my hair dresser to style the hair of the doll in a less intimidating style. She followed me to the salon and after the cut, started to respond to the look I had had in mind at first.

While conducting a study on our gamified art exhibition later on, involving a group of preschool-aged children from a local kindergarten, I was surprised to hear that my doll still had an eerie resemblance to the demonized dolls of popular films of the past: One of the children responded with distaste to the little Sigrid in the photographs – whom she named ‘a creepy doll’.~~[2]~~ Although I could in no way agree with this harsh remark towards the doll I had partly designed myself, I could sympathize the little girl. After all, I know many stories of children (and adults), who have experienced discomfort with toys of a similar kind. In fact, in their beta-version, the MakieDolls seemed far too uncanny to myself and this was the reason why I kept myself from ordering a doll of my own, before its aesthetics developed, and I was encouraged to act.

Image 2. My MakieDoll 3D-printed doll, before and after a professional haircut, given at a salon (for humans). Photos by author.

Method

This review traces the relationship between dolls and people who find them unnerving. One of the aims of the study is to briefly outline the history of dolls as images of the human being with their many faces. First, I discuss how dolls have evolved from ritualistic objects used in religious ceremonies to playthings mostly targeted to female players. I then move on to the historical development of the aesthetics, animism and adult imagination in connection to dolls. Thirdly, after positioning the aesthetic trends of grotesque hyper-simulation in one end and the fantastically emerging *cutification* of contemporary character toys in the other end of the continuum, I then ask what it is in dolls that turns liking into disliking and disgust. Examples of character toys, i.e. toys with a face such as *action figures, dolls and plush* are given to demonstrate, how the horrifying is now being transformed on the one hand to *hyperreal* versions of the popular characters and on the other hand cute, 'tamed' and playable objects. I continue with a discussion on the relationship between dolls and the films that supposedly 'demonized' them by letting toys take center stage as playthings with agency and an aspiration to kill. Finally, by turning to research materials collected from adults, the review presents current examples of dolls that are disliked according to the interviewees. My goal is to find out the reasons behind disliking and to seek answers to if popular narratives, for example, cinematic films are to blame for the 'demonization' of dolls in the experiences informed by adults.

In order to investigate the disliking and the fear for character toys in particular, I conducted a qualitative interview by distributing a questionnaire through social media channels. The questions targeted adults' relationships towards toys on a general level asking about childhood memories of toys and current ownership of them. The questions also addressed the favorite toys and most memorable toy experiences of past and present, and uses of toys both in terms of offline and online practices. Disliking of toys such as negative feelings towards them in childhood and adulthood were asked about in the following set of questions. The last question related directly to discomfort, disgust and fear in association to toys in adulthood with a request for the participants to reflect upon the reasons for such reactions to toys. No questions specifically asked the respondents to draw connections between toys and other media texts, such as audiovisual narratives featuring toys.

The Finnish and English online questionnaire with open-ended questions was distributed on three different social media channels including Figuurien ja Elokuvamemorablian keräilijät (Collectors of Figures and Movie Memorabilia), Star Wars Finland fan group page, and by the help of Finnish toy museum Hevosenkenkä in February-March 2018. With a total of 16 responses the research materials collected represents a scarce, but valuable data set.

Object of study: Defining the dolly

The currently available version of the Oxford English Online Dictionary defines the doll as "a small model of a human figure, typically one of a baby or girl, used as a child's toy."

Lois Kuznets writes how the origins of the word doll "first recoded in 1700, is simply derived from the diminutive Dorothy (at one time Doroty also signified a puppet), and has associations with littleness, triviality, and vanity. In Latin and French, the words for doll are the same as for puppet; in German, the word essentially identifies a block of wood" (Kuznets, 1994, 11-12).

Dolls, unlike other playthings, have always been recognized by adults to have a special significance to their owners, Newson & Newson write (1979, 87). Most of the oldest 'dolls' now exhibited in museums were, according to Newson & Newson, never children's toys, but were made and used for religious and magical purposes (Ibid.). However, this view of dolls as ritual objects has been debated extensively. One early example that illustrates the complexity of defining the role of historical dolls as a part of human activities can even be found in academic literature of the early 20th century, for example, in the writings of Yrjö Hirn, Professor of Aesthetics and Modern Literature, and an early Finnish researcher of toys and play who was active in the beginning of the 1900s. Hirn writes: "it can't be denied that among the savage and barbarian peoples there have been discoveries of many small modellings of the human body, which are not used as play dolls, but as instruments in magic doings or which are seen to function a habitation of some dead soul. On the other hand, to counterbalance, one can plead to Dr. Luschan's observations of some West-African wooden images, which museum lists claim to be false gods, but which, in reality are nothing else than pure playthings of children" (Hirn, 1918, 19, translation by the author).

Animism, or the belief of objects, animals and plants to have spiritual lives of their own connects with the idea of bringing toys into life. In this tradition of thinking, objects are given agency, so that the manipulable object is believed to encompass supernatural qualities. Again, anthropomorphizing refers to the tendency of attributing human form or personality to things not human (see e.g. Merriam-Webster dictionary). Humans are predisposed to anthropomorphize, to project human emotions and beliefs into anything (Norman, 2004, 138). In terms of relationships to toys, this tendency to 'animate the inanimate' is also visible in adult toy play and the cultures around it (Heljakka, 2013). For example, a study conducted by Hiromi Ikeuchi (2010) examined adults who organized memorial services for dolls.

Besides the traditional thinking of the doll as a *girl's toy-baby*, as defined by Oxford English Dictionary, in the 21st century the meanings of dolls are renegotiated as toys of all kinds are gaining more ground as playthings of adults. For example, dolls can no longer be viewed as purely feminine objects intended for girls and women, but for all gender and ages. Moreover, the boundary between what comprises a doll and what is to be understood as an action figure, is blurring. For instance, the MakieLab pioneered in their decision to expand the notion of dolls by defining their plaything an *action doll*.~~[3]~~ Therefore, we should broaden our understanding of dolls to include all playable humanoid figures, such as action figures and soft toys, which have also been discussed as *character toys*, or, toys with a face (Heljakka, 2013). For the sake of clarity, in this review I challenge the notion of the doll further, by

extending its meaning to include puppets. Consequently, the terms toys, dolls and puppets are used interchangeably.

The mundane and the monstruous: Dolls of the contemporary

Experiences in relation to toys may be structured by using a framework with the dimensions of physical, functional, fictive and affective (Heljakka, 2017, see Table 1). Contemporary dolls as three-dimensional, material playthings may in other words be considered as *physical* entities that can be manipulated in terms of object play. Usually, the dolls are *functional* in terms of both their playability – they are intended to be used in play of some kind and afford, for example, possibilities to pose and display them in different ways. Dolls of the contemporary kind often also include a *fictional* aspect – they may due to their personality as character toys have a backstory of some kind. In the simplest sense, they may have a name and a personality described in a few sentences. On the other hand, they can be tied to transmedia franchises or storyworlds. Finally, the toy experience usually includes an *affective* component, which means that the player forms an emotional bond with the plaything.

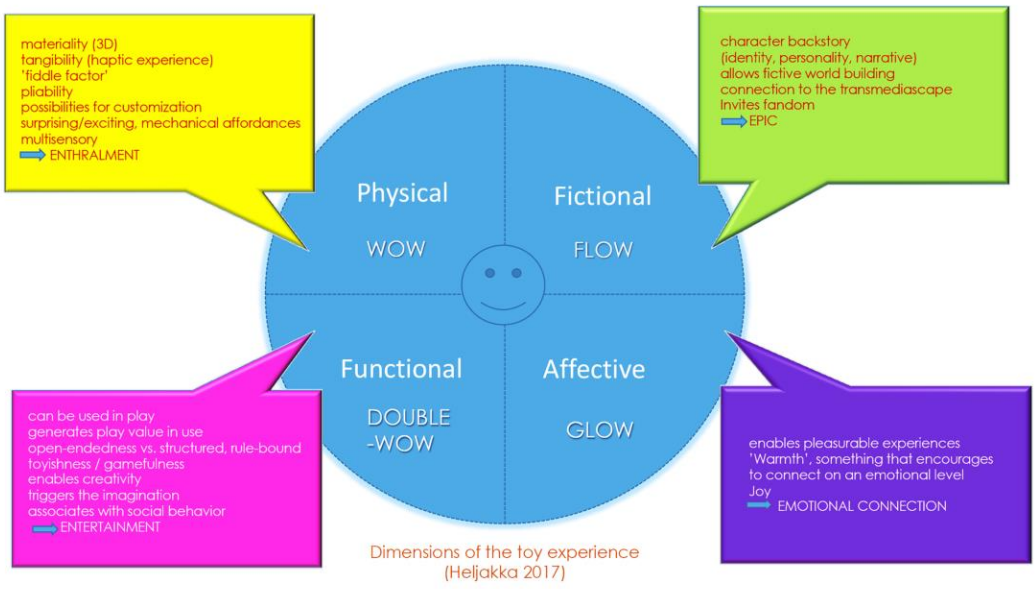

Figure 1. Dimensions of the toy experience.

The aesthetics of the doll play a significant part in a dual process of bonding with it: Either one befriending the plaything as an 'individual' – a standalone character with its own personality (i.e. backstory) not entwined with a web of transmedial connections, or simply using it as a *dis*playable item, a three-dimensional material reminiscent of adoration for other popular culture phenomena one has a fannish relation to, such as films or TV series.

The toy industry is heavily guided by trends and the idea of newness. Although new character toys are brought to the marketplace constantly, only a handful of these toys remain on the market after the first years. Generally, toys that have transmedia connections, survive in the ecosystem of play thanks to these relations (Heljakka, 2016).

Today, as in the past, toys are objects with designs that can reflect contemporary fashions and trends (Brougère, 2003). Dark themes interested in the fantastic supernatural have thrived in contemporary doll design for some time now. According to traditional thought and especially considering the most typical perspective on toys as objects belonging to childhood, toys should not be too scary, Yet, popular culture is full of cinematic examples of dolls 'gone wrong' (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 3, c.f. in Heljakka, 2013, 340).

In popular Western entertainments through the end of the twentieth century, the supernatural translated mostly as terror and monsters enjoyably consumed (Nelson, 2001, 19). The toys of today have come to communicate attitude, spunk and subcultural styles of a darker, morbid nature. Seemingly, skulls, dark tones and gothic attributes familiar from the horror genre have found their permanent way to Toyland.

One major difference between the toy cultures of adults and that of children is that the toys directed to adult 'collectors', fans, geeks or toy enthusiasts are constantly redefining the limits and level of 'darkness' in toys. After the rise of vampires, werewolves, voodoo dolls and zombies on the market of toys, trends in horror inspiring toy designs are split between the hyper-simulated and the fantastic.

As suggested elsewhere, the 'uncannyness' of the toy depends on where it falls on the axis between the simulation of real, and to the fantastic, and to some – the *morbid* (Heljakka 2013, 346). In this paper this aesthetic is discussed with the help of the notion of 'uncanny'. Nelson formulizes the "uncanny" as something that literally cannot be "kenned" or known by the five senses. She writes that Freud's famous definition of the uncanny (or unheimlich) relates primarily to a resurgence of primitive "discarded beliefs" – omnipotence of thought, fulfilment of secret wishes, return of the dead, and so on (Nelson, 2001, 17). The uncanny has inspired many storytellers of the past, especially in connection to dolls.

In the horror genre, evil also resides in the figures of the dolls themselves. For example, *Chucky* (*Child's Play*, 1988) and the doll *Annabelle*, known from the horror films in the *Conjuring* franchise are now available to purchase as 'life-size', three-dimensional versions from outlets catering to the adult toy and fan merchandise market, and provided by the series of hyper-simulated Living Dead Dolls—designed by Ed Long and Damien Gloneck, and produced by Mezco Toyz since 2000, true to their cinematic paragons such as *Chucky* and *Annabelle*.

The toy industry with its novelties and collectable items directs these products primarily to adults. Mature audiences are expected to cope with toy-types that would not be let in any nursery. Yet counter-trends to the nightmarish and grotesque may be detected in contemporary toy cultures: As horror is becoming increasingly toyified, it is simultaneously

cutified as well. Whereas the hyper-simulated toys meticulously follow their forerunners in the context of film in their accuracy to detail, the other end of the fantastic seem to cutify and soften the dark and monstrous elements of the characters by making them more compact and by adding plumpness and more vulnerable expressions to their facial features.

Funko Pop!, a massively popular series of character toys is based on seemingly every possible transmedia phenomenon (horror-related or other) that was ever dreamed up by the human mind, for example, the characters from the remake of Stephen King's *It* (2017) such as *Pennywise the Dancing Clown*. In this way, the toyification of horror with its cute toy-types of vampires, werewolves, Voodoo dolls and most recently *Stranger Things'* Demogorgon as cutified by Funko, continue to blur the boundaries between what is commonly addressed to as 'sick' and 'evil' and the common idea of character toys as cute, tamed and approachable, child-friendly objects. What is considered monstrous, then, is in constant transition: As result, Jenkins writes, 'any stable separation between the monstrous and the normal is breaking down. What provoked unimaginable horror a decade ago, might well be mainstream and mundane today (Jenkins, 2007, 50).

Yrjö Hirn's ideas from one hundred years ago seem to touch upon the same phenomenon of humour contrasting with the horrendous, as he writes:"Uglyness that is not anymore capable of terrifying, amuses as a comical phenomenon. That is why it is rare for some toys to be more popular among children than those that frightened them and that still awake a small, but passing sense of fear; and this is why one meets many grotesque masks, dolls and toys among uncivilized and civilized nations, whereof it is not easy to decide if the purpose of their ugliness is to frighten or to amuse" (Hirn, 1918, 17, translation by the author).

Image 3. Examples of Funko Pop! character toys: Multiple Pennywise clowns and 'toyfriends'. Photo by author.

Animating the inanimate: Dolls in play(s)

"A puppet is an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience. It is the sum of these qualities that uniquely defines the puppet. Nothing else quite satisfies the definition… It is definitely not a doll. When somebody plays with a doll, it involves an intimate action which never extends past the two of them. The player supplies the life for the both of them" (Baird, 1965, 3, c.f. in Haskell, 2017).

The doll (or a puppet) as a play*thing* cannot be separated from the activity of play. Victoria Nelson, author of *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001) writes of Plato, who in his text *The Laws* describes the puppet to explain how humans, as the gods' puppets, are pulled in various directions by their desires but must strive to go on in the direction of that cord which represents the common good (Nelson, 2001, 42). In other words, according to traditional thought, the player has agency over the plaything. Haskell (2017, n.p.) notes how Baird distinguishes the puppet from the doll. She writes:

"However, the intentions which separate the two are unique; the player of the doll is entirely selfish in their actions, creating an intimate process of imagination beneficial only to the self. Contrastingly, the puppeteer animates the puppet for the enjoyment of the audience – perhaps the audience enjoys the performance even more than the puppeteer enjoys creating it. Whilst the doll is recreational only for the player, the puppet creates a world of its own that shifts

attention away from the puppeteer and draws the audience into its liveliness, thoughts, concerns – and survival."

Some people find dolls a particularly disliked category of character toys. For a long time, I have wondered whether or not the reason for disliking dolls is grounded in the human tendency to anthropomorphize dolls, think of them as malevolent, and if this is true, find certain types of dolls a source of more discomfort than other ones.

As said, anthropomorphizing points to the human desire to inanimate the nonhuman. It is extended to all sorts of objects: "they toys that emerge from the toy cupboard are all granted mobility, feelings, and desires" (Kuznets, 1994, 144). Karl Groos writes in the *Play of Man* (first published in 1901), "the child playing with the doll raises the lifeless thing temporarily to a place of a symbol of life. He lends the doll his own soul whenever he answers a question for it: he lends to it his feelings, conceptions and aspirations" (Groos & Baldwin, 2010, 203). Adult imagination in connection to dolls of the contemporary kind results, at many times, as well in the anthropomorphizing of the plaything, when the interest leans heavily on 'animating the inanimate', giving the toy a life.

Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris note in their book *Toying with God* (2010) how dolls can be used to channel a socially acceptable personality in play, to function as an outlet for unsanctioned feelings or to conduct acts of rebellion. Moreover, dolls can be a projection of what one is not supposed to be (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris, 2010, 160). From the perspective of my study, I emphasize the last mentioned option – the use of dolls as vehicles that mirror projections of our dark side: Humans as the 'dislikers', dolls as the 'disliked', even demonized entities, and investigate their connection to popular narratives of the past that make use of playthings, and pediophobia.

Pediophobia: Fear of dolls and the pop culture to blame

For many adults, pediophobia, or, the fear of dolls, often relates to playthings of the(ir) past, but as a phenomenon, is not restricted to historical toys. It is an anxiety disorder that can be associated with a range of (and wide understanding of) dolls. To be more, precise, according to a definition given in Fearofnet.com – "The ultimate list of phobias and fears", *pediophobia* entails:

…the unwarranted, irrational and persistent fear or worry of dolls. It is a specific phobia belonging to the category of 'automatonphobia'. This is a type of phobia where the individual is afraid of all humanoid or "human-like- but-not-quite" objects including mannequins, marionettes, ventriloquist's dummies, wax figures, animatrix or robotic figures etc. (*Pediophobia, or the fear of dolls phobia*)

During the years of my research interested in toys and playing carried out with them, I have, on several occasions met with reactions that express a severe dismissal, distaste if not a fear for my own dolls. Most often, the negativity has, according to the commentators, resulted

from the fact that for instance the *Blythe* dolls, (Kenner, 1972 – later Hasbro), have a large and staring pair of eyes that many find disturbing. Additional to this, Blythe dolls have a mechanical feature that most dolls lack: A 'magical' set of eyes which change in color by pulling a string. For most, this is the source for utter disliking: the doll's mechanical but mystified ability to transform 'at the blink of an eye'. I can easily understand the disliking of certain toys, particularly with dolls in mind – I indeed share this dislike for some toy types, mostly, historical ones, myself. Still, the question tantalizes me: What is it in dolls that make us avoid them? What is it, besides the aesthetics of a plaything that provokes feelings of unease in a person?

Apart from the toy itself, there seem to be other reasons for disliking and fearing of dolls. To my belief, pediophobia as a condition is reinforced by contemporary storytelling, in particular, through audiovisual, televisual and cinematic films. But previous studies on the relationships between toys and narratives illustrate how playthings as characters of (horror and other genres of) stories have emerged as a phenomenon in literature long before the moving image as popular culture knows it today.

For example, a journalist named Carlo Lorenzi, writing as Carlo Collodi produced a serialized novel of a wooden puppet who finally achieves his dream of becoming a real human boy, *The Adventures of Pinocchio: Story of a Puppet* (1883). Nelson observes how the novel anchored on the trend of writing stories about puppets rather than staging puppet performances with them (Nelson, 2001, 253).

"A stronger type of subversion is sometimes evident in stories where toys go their own way and engage in liminal, carnival behavior. This behavior will allow the child reader an otherwise forbidden identification—a safe form that has its fascination and terror", writes Lois Kuznets in her book, *When Toys Come Alive* (1994, 43).

My own childhood experience of fear related to certain types of dolls ties in with a popular, Norwegian-British TV miniseries of the 1980s, *Maelstrom* (1985). The show used multiple scenes of antique dolls floating in water or becoming distorted when burning in a fire – haunted images in my own mind that were vigorously discussed with childhood friends during the mid-1980s.

In *Maelstrom*, the presence of dolls – silent and paralyzed, yet unnerving – was to my interpretation used to reinforce the psychological state of the main character, a young woman who visited a house filled with secrets in coastal Norway. The uncomfortable, yet suggestive silence of the antique dolls in a coastal villa, was a product of their empty stare: These creatures knew something that the main character—or the audience, did not.

Play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith says that it is dangerous to pretend that we know what a child will do with a toy based on its characteristics alone because children have a way of doing things with toys over and beyond the apparent character of the toy (Sutton-Smith, 1986). The idea of monstrosity and evil treatment in reference to playthings has been toyed with for example in the *Toy Story* trilogy's first film, and later a cameo role in *Toy Story 3*

(1995-2010)[4], which have introduced the character of viscous Sid Phillips, the neighborhood 'bad boy' who conducts questionable experiments with toys tricked from their original owners. The Hieronymus Bosch-esque landscape of Sid's laboratory is intimidating indeed, as the strange hybrids mashed-up of a diversity of toy elements are constructed with seemingly evil plans in mind.

There seems to be something very appealing about what is considered dangerous, if not downright evil in play. According to Kuznets, abuse as a theme is recognized and widespread in all doll stories (1994, 107). As shown, pediophobia as a form of fear does not exclude other humanoid types of three-dimensional figures such as puppets or dummies. In fact, these types of toys were one of the first playthings to express violence in popular storytelling. Nelson's book demonstrates how 'homicidal mannequins' emerged in Anglo-American popular film after the year 1950. The violent puppet entertainments of Punch and Judy and puppet-to-puppet terror changed, according to Nelson, with the *Dead of Night* (1945). In this British film, Hugo, a ventriloquist's dummy, appears as the "first puppet murderer of a human in a popular film" (Nelson, 2001, 257).

The tradition of man-made characters that channel evil intentions has continued in recent horror films such as the SAW series with *Billy the Puppet* that debuted in the film *SAW* (2004) and has since made appearances in comics, video games and at amusement parks. The character offers inspiration to fan-made art as well. For example, Etsy, the outlet for creative maker culture currently showcases numerous toyified versions of Billy, such as a Lego-version and several amigurumis.

Moreover, the fear of clowns, or *clourlofobia*, intertwines with pediophobia, not only as a popular 'toy-trope' in cinematic films of the past, but due to the fact that many clown characters of the TV series and films have been recently toyified.[5] For example, the clown doll in the film *Poltergeist* (1982) and the novel and television adaptation of Stephen King's *It* (1990) with *Pennywise the Dancing Clown* represent some classic examples of narratives in which clowns – either toy versions or humanoid types – terrorize children and families by their murderous behaviour. The latter, comes in fact, in several toy versions, for example as cutified by Funko Pop! (for references, see Images 3 and 4).

As shown, with toys, practices of viewing audiovisual material (*spectatorship*) turns to object relations including both imaginative and manipulative engagement with physical materials (*play*) when imagination is woven into the fabric of materiality. Besides collecting toys, the toy enthusiasts of the contemporary kind create customized horror toy characters which are not yet to be found in the traditional toy store, such as the Lego version of Billy the Puppet.

Terrorizing toys are finding their inspiration from the sphere of social media as well: Today, digital folklore is increasingly affected and mediated by social media phenomena. Memes are turned to both material and digital playthings and find their way to the toy chests of players of many ages. Online cultures are now what television and films used to be – a site for selective consumption. Additionally, they are playgrounds in which creativity and disruption

thrive. In this way, they enable audiences of the past to become creators, even in the context of toyification of culture.

One example is *Slender Man*, a digital character born in the online forum Something Awful and further developed through mimetic practices on the Social Web as this character was quickly turned into multiple toys by makers within DIY culture.

Slender Man conveys contemporary horror outsourced, describes Chess (2012). Digital folklore and toyification thereof demonstrate a new, inspirational avenue for toy design, if the active and creative participants of maker culture are to believe. Although the popularity of customized horror toys among the (child) audience remains unknown, the practice of creating them indicates that what is not made available by mass-market outlets of global toy companies, will eventually find its way through creative (adult) hands to DIY toy markets such as Etsy.

Research on the dislikeys and the 'damned'

What *causes* pediophobia? Is it the subjective aesthetic preferences in relation to character toys, narratives of toys that are evil, the demonization of toys based on popular narratives or a combination of these? Kenneth Gross, in his book *Puppet. An Essay on Uncanny Life* (2011) interviewed a puppet artist, Giuliano, who claimed a distaste for 'children's dolls', which I assume to refer to the baby dolls most of us know young children are first playing with:

"Among so many sorts of toys, puppets, and manikins, there are no traditional children's dolls [in his studio]. When I ask Giuliano about this, he explains that such dolls, with their smooth faces, chubby cheeks, and glass eyes, their static, kitschy innocence, disturb him too much. They carry too strong an air of death about them. He explains that dolls of this sort were originally created in the nineteenth century as memorial portraits of dead children" (Gross, 2011, 21.)

As seen in Giuliano's response, although playthings like "children's play dolls" referred to in this example are traditionally thought of as objects connected to childhood innocence, they may also cause other types of responses. In Giuliano's thinking, there may also be a disturbing 'air of death' around the chubby cheeks of children's dollies at least for those who position them in the context of historical uses of dolls.

For many, the risk of spontaneous encounters with the dolls must be eliminated, at least in the domestic sphere. Anecdotal information I have gathered throughout the years being a toy researcher demonstrate examples of toys that are disliked, such as the story of the Italian wedding doll that was given to a young bride and ultimately, hidden under her bed because she, according to her own words utterly 'disliked the dolly' and found it disturbing. If these snippets of information regarding dolls were to be taken as evidence for that adults have a tendency to fear some types of toys, there would already a great deal of research materials

gathered for this review, dealing with the relationship between pediophobia and popular culture of the present. However, the inquiry calls out for a more rigorous method of study.

Related academic research on pediophobia is scarce, when considering studies on toy culture. In a study conducted by Eberle (2009) at the Strong National Institute of Play, participants were found to express nostalgia and fondness to certain doll types, while others provoked feelings of unease. Eberle writes about the uncanny as something that lies just outside the boundary of play. "The disquieting, unnerving, spooky, and somewhat sickly sensation contrasts with the pleasure and ease we feel at play; beginning to feel unnerved and spooked is to start to feel the sense of play draining away […] the words describe the odd sense that arises from an encounter with an object that looks real enough to be real, or moves realistically enough to seem real, but that is nevertheless not real or that seems not quite real" (Eberle, 2009, 168). In contemporary toy cultures, the concept of uncanny, relates to both toy design and play patterns (Heljakka, 2013).

Empirical study: What is liked and what is not

According to some, popular culture itself 'demonizes' dolls. Previously, I have speculated on how much of the disliking of dolls is grounded in the demonization of dolls that multiple horror series and films and can be accused for doing. This paper aims to a critical inspection of these themes through an empirical study introduced in the next part of the review.

The goal of this review is to seek answers to which facets, types and even brands of dolls – historical and present – provoke pediophobia. I am interested in the reasons for how casual disliking turns to disgust and even fear of toys such as antique dolls, anatomically realistic dolls and grotesque dolls. The review builds on the study focusing on baby dolls and described in the article by Eberle through an exploration of the notion of the uncanny, introduced by Jentsch (1906) and later famously used by Mashihiro Mori (1970) in connection with characters (robots and dolls).

In order to find out about the toys that are liked and disliked in contemporary times, an interview questionnaire with fifteen questions was composed for an adult audience of toys in both Finnish and English. Altogether sixteen adults, both male and female born between years 1947-1992 participated by answering the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to provide pseudonyms and real names were later changed by the researcher in order to guarantee full anonymity. Six of the participants answered in Finnish, the rest in English. The Finnish answers were translated to English by the author.

The research data was inspected through a thematic analysis, through which the answers were grouped into thematic categories according to the *Dimensions of the toy experience framework* (see Figure 1.).

The questions were formulated in order to find out about the participants' attitudes towards toys in general. Moreover, the open-ended questions targeted both positive and negative

experiences related to toys. Questions related to positive matters dealt with favourite toys of childhood and in adulthood, current ownership of toys, the most memorable toy experience, and online and offline play activities with toys. What was of most interest from the perspective of this study, were the questions concerning negative aspects of toy relations. It is important to note how the questions did not address dolls per se, but toys in more general terms. This ensured the validity of the collected research material, as the open-ended questions allowed more nuanced reflections to be communicated by the participants of the study.

To exemplify, the participants were asked to answer questions of the following kind:

- Name toys you dislike (mention what kind of toys) including an explanation why.
- Are there toys that provoke negative feelings in you? If yes, what kind of toys and why?
- Have you had experiences with toys in your childhood that you would describe as negative? If yes, please describe in which way?
- Describe the kind of toys that make you feel uneasy (feel discomfort, disgust, fear etc.) in adulthood, with an explanation why you think this is the case.

Results

The answers to the questions concerning positive and negative aspects of toy experiences were grouped according to areas addressed in the *Dimensions of the toy experience framework* (see Figure 1.) and their relations to the physicality, fictionality, functionality and affectivity will be discussed briefly in the following.

Toys are *functional* and invite to play on many levels. According to participants ‘Misteli’ and ‘Jenni’, toys, in the ownership of adults are interesting objects because of their capability to communicate playfulness:”They [toys] store sentiments, they are a symbol of being carefree and imaginative. They lack the seriousness of most other things and inspire playfulness” (Interviewee ’Misteli’).”They [toys] are diverse and meant for everybody, they empower and break the paradigm of playfulness being only for the kids” (Interviewee ’Jenni’).

Toys are *fictional* because of their relationship to narratives and transmedia storytelling, as illustrated in the comment made by ‘Rawhawk’: ”Toys capture the feelings of the movies and cartoons they are based on. Toys bring up many memories and stories.”

Similarly, the reasons for disliking toys may be grouped into areas of physicality, fictionality, functionality and affectivity. The strategies of disliking toys range, according to the interviewees, between a dislike for poorly made objects of play (functionality) to a dislike for toys with a certain aesthetic (physicality, fictionality). Interviewee ‘Rawhawk’ says that “any toy which don’t bring the best quality to the table gets my dislikes”. For example, fifty percent of the interviewees claimed a dislike for toys of bad quality that tend to break easily. Other reasons given for the disliking of such toys have to do with that they contain too few

details or have a single specific action feature. In other words, they are considered too short-lived because of a lack of sustained play value.

More specifically, toys are disliked by two of the interviewees (‘Misteli’ and ‘Katti’) because of either sound in general or poorly executed sound design. Besides the auditive dimensions of toys (sounds), the aspect of olfactory qualities (sense of smell) was mentioned in one interviewee comment describing disliking of toys: “[I also dislike] toys that smell awful like barbies [sic]”.

Two of the interviewees (‘Eulaalia’ and ‘K-pie’) pointed out that they don’t really dislike the toys, but become sad “if someone has broken the toy” (affectivity), or “It’s more a matter whether they appeal to me or not” – comments, which again relate to the question of aesthetics encapsulated in the toys physicality, functionality or fictionality.

A more philosophical reason given for the disliking of toys was made in a comment by interviewee ‘Jenni’, who stated that “any kind of toy that has exploit sexualization, inadequate cultural appropriation, stereotyping or profiling of some sort. I dislike toys “meant for x or y gender and toys that feed superficiality, war or severity.” The sexualization of dolls in particular, was brought forward in another comment as well, given by interviewee ’CutiePlushie’ in the following way: ”I don’t like toys toys (that are sold for little girls) that describe girls too sexy, like Bratz-dolls – they’re too plastic looking and their proportions are way off (huge lips and eyes and tiny body).”

Character toys, and dolls in particular are for many the plastic manifestations of our cultural condition and in the 2010s according to some, toy design is still to be blamed for promoting unrealistic body images and overtly exaggerated facial features. In one way then, disliking for (fashion) dolls especially links with societal concerns of the moment, such as over sexualization of children and youngsters. At the same time the fantastic toy is paradoxically blamed for not conveying realism. Furthermore, these dolls are understood to communicate a lifestyle in terms of choice of clothing that is not seen as appropriate for their main target group of young girls. As interviewee ‘Misteli’ describes, one example of these dolls are Bratz: “I’m all for women expressing their sexuality how they choose, but these dolls were dressed and painted like brazen hussies, and marketed to pre-teen girls.”

Image 4. Close ups of the Chucky doll and a ‘cutified’ Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Photos by author.

“Just too scary”: Disliking turns to fear of dolls

In the questionnaire, the interviewees were also asked to describe the kind of toys that make one feel uneasy – to feel discomfort, disgust, fear etc. in adulthood, and to provide an explanation why they think this is the case. Adjectives such as ‘scary’ or ‘creepy’ were intentionally left out for the sake of neutrality. Nevertheless, similar wordings were used at most times by the interviewees, when they described the kind of toys that provoked uneasiness in them.

Four of the interviewees reported not to have experiences of unease or feelings of fear in relation to dolls. However, nine respondents informed the researcher that the toys that created such feelings in them, represented character toys and dolls in particular. The doll-types mentioned in these nine answers ranged from baby dolls (that cry or speak) to fashion dolls – and old-fashioned dolls– from puppets to clowns and life-like dolls to finally, a toy representing a doll familiar from horror storytelling, namely Chucky~~[6]~~.

The doll types mentioned in more detail in the research materials include references to popular mass-produced dolls intended for children, such as baby dolls. In her answer, interviewee ‘CutiePlush’ shares an anecdote from childhood illustrating how the aesthetics can cause a complex situation, when the player is unsure of how to cater for the dolls’ needs:

“the boy-doll […] it never smiled so I never played using it and still I didn’t want to throw it away. I thought that he needed comfort, it made me confused” (Interviewee ‘CutiePlushie).

Babies as character toys go hand in hand with emotional responses of their players, as the two following interview excerpts illustrate: ”BabyBorn – I have never liked those baby toys! …and maybe something looking creepy (bloody, angry or sad face)…” (Interviewee ’CutiePlushie’). Interviewee ‘Rita’ explains the complexity of bonding with a childhood doll that is sad as well: ”I have a doll from childhood…a little boy that cries – I don’t understand why a child would want a toy who always cries and never smiles. And a creepy real-looking doll makes me nervous. If it would stare me from the shelf, I could panic in the night” (Interviewee ’Rita’).

Interviewee ‘CutiePlushie’ gives a reason for not coping with “scary looking life-like dolls, [as their] eyes [are] open and staring…sooo creepy”. The face of a doll seems to cause feelings of unease in respondents, but the research data also includes references to ventriloquist dummies, clowns and character toys made popular by horror narratives: ”Dolls like Chucky are just too scary for me” (Interviewee K-pie’). And: “Charlee McCarthy dummy…you know why” (Interviewee ’JR’)~~[7]~~.

”If the toy would have to do with some horror theme and I would be very young at my age, that could scare me. For example, the doll Annabelle which is part of a horror film. On the other hand I found different clown toys scary as a child, I did not like them. My mother collected wooden clown toys, which of one could move like in a puppet theatre. This feeling of fear really comes from the horror movies which I watched a lot when I was young. The expressions on the clowns’ faces were so unnormal and created a sense of fear in me”, interviewee ’Rita’ explains.

The anthropomorphization, or the attribution of human characteristics in dolls, results in a fear that once left ‘unplayed’, tossed in the trash and abandoned, the toy would make its way back and take revenge. Interviewee ‘Ashley’ connects this fear with antique dolls and dolls that speak: ”The old-fashioned and creepy looking dolls. The ones that have the right kinda stare that makes you feel like they are evil within when they look cute on the outside. If they giggle/laugh or say ”mamma”, when you press their tummy it’s even more creepy. You get the feeling they gonna come back if you throw them into trash and other spooky stuff” (Interviewee ’Ashley’).

”Sometimes as a young child I was scared that I have hurted my toys somehow and they would get their revenge for me when I fall asleep. […]. Because of horror movies I […] get anxious about baby dolls. We have one of those little BabyBorn dolls received as a gift and I always try to not hurt it and if I see it on the floor it needs to be put into its bed so that it won’t mind and take revenge :D” (Interviewee ‘CutiePlushie’).

In sum, although toys are loved and cherished objects in the lives of some adults, the same adults also demonstrate how certain toys are less liked and appreciated. In fact, there are toy types capable of communicating negative associations thanks to their ‘toyish’ dimensions

from physicality of the plaything to their functional affordances (or despite of these affordances), and from their ties to transmedia storytelling to the individual and affective meanings and connections established by their players.

What the study shows is that although none of the interviewees reported to suffer from pediophobia directly, there are several comments among the answers in the research data that point to how character toys sometimes also provoke feelings of fear in adults. The most prominent reasons described by the participants of the study for the fear of dolls was either because of the specific aesthetic of the doll, or their imagined agency. That is, dolls as a particular category of toys are causing discomfort due to their looks versus the action the toys are envisioned to take, if treated poorly by their owners. Both the aesthetic of toys and the agency they have, has for a long time offered inspiration to the genre of horror storytelling, especially with its audiovisually-oriented productions in mind. Dolls are 'homes' for evil because of their endless potentiality to embody the monstrous 'other'. At the same time they are 'uncanny' – not really because "the toys are us", but because they carry scarily close resemblance to the human-being, on the one hand mirroring cuteness and warmth but also, on the other hand, the capability to channel a killer-instinct when becoming 'possessed'.

Discussion

Toys are a *medium* in themselves, largely powered by storytelling. This medium has different genres according to toy types. In this review, I have investigated the relationships between pediophobia and pop culture, and presented an empirical study interested in the disliking of contemporary character toys. What is distinct about these toys is that they come with a face, often with a set of expressive eyes.

As speculated in the beginning of this journey, popular narratives especially tied to dolls of different kind have an effect on how today's adults relate to toys. The horror genre in particular influences toy culture in a multitude of ways. In fact, three directions may be detected, when investigating the relationship between horror and toys. First, horror with its themes and characters inspires toy design. Second, the results of toy design based on horror storytelling become a tangible resource for players to reminiscence and display their horror-related experiences by manipulation of the toys. Third, disliking of dolls happens because of aesthetic preferences: disliking their appearance, physical form and materiality, face value or a lack thereof.

Nevertheless, and perhaps most importantly, toys and dolls in particular, function as a source for horror stories – toys are the reason *for* horror because they have been chosen to depict, channel and become the vehicle for the (d)evil. This is where disliking turns to discomfort. Dolls make one uncomfortable because a fear made possible by products of popular culture: for animating of the inanimate, the behavior, agency and actions of toys in popular narratives, and the functionality the playthings have conveyed in stories.

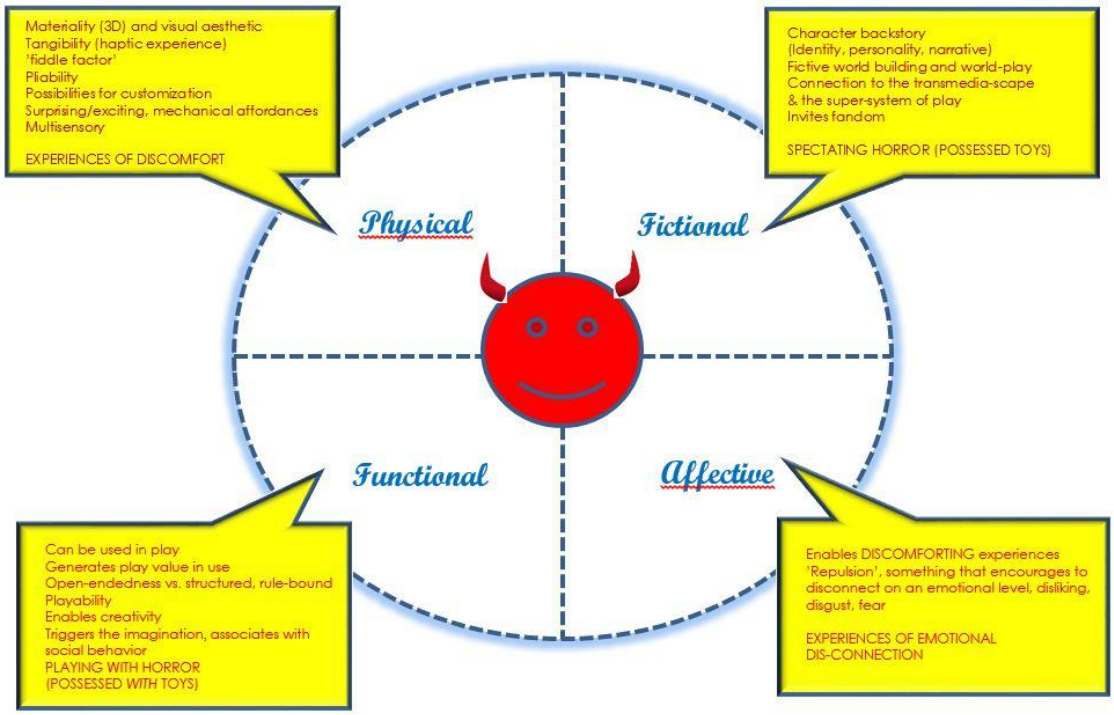

Figure 2. Dimensions of the horror toy experience.

Toys as a tangible medium make it possible to treat these physical entities as objects of study that allow many perspectives to be taken into account. As formulized in Figure 2, the "Dimensions of the toy horror experience" are based on the regular dimensions of toy experiences – the physical, fictional, functional and affective, but with distinctive accentuations, as illustrated in this review.

A final example clarifies this: The *physicality of the toy*, according to the study presented in the review may cause discomfort in terms of its "scary" aesthetics, like the Chucky doll. But for fearing Chucky, there are other reasons as well, those mostly tied to popular culture through its transmedial relations. It is the *fiction* behind the toy, the character backstory of Chucky as presented in the film that made the possessed doll a celebrity.

Nelson writes, "Killer puppets like Chucky clearly embody the long-standing Protestant dictum that what is not of this world is the Devil. As the supernatural is a Protestant taboo it enables the idea of evil to inhabit the spiritual realm and at times possess 'the proxy bodies of imaginary artificial humans'" (Nelson, 2001, 259). Chucky's own *functionality* makes it impossible for the owner of such a doll to have agency. The toy is functional in the sense that it possesses its owner. But the *affective* component in relation to Chucky then, as my study suggests, emerges as perverse emotional dis-connection with the doll: One cannot nurture a toy friend that has murderous intentions in mind – not at least one which in its fictional state may harm its owner. And once again, the attention turns to the player and preferences beyond aesthetics or pop culture: Some of us are more willing to explore the dark aspects of the human condition through their object interests and toy play.

Conclusion

Toys represent a powerful medium which is able to mirror the human condition in many ways. Both toy-based horror and stories based on other supernatural narratives – what has previously terrified audiences and fans of screen-based entertainment – are now being *toyified* – i.e. turned into multifaceted, three-dimensional playthings to generate visual, tactile pleasure and enjoyment derived from their narrative aspects for the object players of today.

This review has discussed distaste, disliking and the fear of dolls in relation to adult experiences of playthings. The goal was to investigate dolls – a wide category of character toys including puppets, action figures and soft toys – as a source for disliking and discomfort. Whereas fear of the imaginative unseen may present the greatest source for horror of all, the disliking and disgust of the physically manipulable toys offer a multidimensional object of study, which has been targeted from many angles in this review.

Even though toys with a face such as action figures, soft toys (or plush) or dolls of different types offer enjoyment, comfort and even possibilities to cultivate creative skills for many adults, there seem to be some who express a dislike for particular dolls and feel discomfort around them.

Despite multifaceted reasons to disliking associated with the physical dimensions of toys such as fragility and stereotypical aesthetics, the most central topic raised in the interviews was a disliking for dolls because of different levels pediophobia. Essentially, the most obvious connection made by the interviewees in my study is the one between disliked and discomforting dolls and how they have appeared in popular audiovisual storytelling, namely the connection between characters made known by television series or popular films and the dolls' distinctive way of acting in the narratives. In sum, character toys and puppets, for which I, for the sake of clarity, have used the joint term *dolls*, are disliked for their potentiality as active agents.

Possible avenues for further research would, for example, be first, specific case studies on how horror is being *re-played with toys* e.g. in photoplay (i.e. photographing or videographing toys), and second, case studies on how industry designed horror toys versus independently created or customized horror toys emerge as three dimensional objects for play.

What presents an additional possible area of research is to turn to YouTube, the largest shop window to the cultures of toy play of today, in order to see how amateur creators of horror entertainment have continued (or challenged) toy-tropes made popular by the horror films using playthings in their plots for shock value. For instance, a study on player created YouTube videos on demonized dolls would propose an interesting example of a study in order to examine, how toy-related horror has evolved in connection with the rise of user-

created content, as results of ‘playbor’, and in the hands of the ones who are inspired by dolls, both liked and loved, but also disliked and demonized.

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All links verified September 30, 2018.

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Notes

[1] Accoding to an article published by Techcrunch, the doll company has since been partly acquired by Disney. See: https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/22/makielab-may-the-force-be-with-you/?guccounter=1.

[2] For further information on the gamified art exhibition, it's implications and the possible 'pitfalls' in creating game elements such as character design, see: Heljakka, Katriina & Ihamäki, Pirita (2017) Designing an Urban Adventure Gamescape: Avoiding the Pitfalls in Creating Opportunities for Learning Through Location Based Games. *Play 2 Learn Proceedings*, 19. Abril, 2018. Forum Picoas, Lisbon. 297–317.

[3] For a discussion on dolls and gender, see for example Heljakka, 2016: http://widerscreen.fi/numerot/2016-1-2/strategies-social-screen-players-across-ecosystem-play-toys-games-hybrid-social-play-technologically-mediated-playscapes/.

[4] A fourth film is set to launch in 2019. See: https://www.wthr.com/article/toy-story-4-gets-june-2019-release-date.

[5] *Toyification* refers here to the idea of an entity being reinforced with toyish elements or aesthetics; an object (also tool, instrument, system etc.), a character or a human being acquiring a toyish appearance, form or function through intentional or motivated behaviour.

[6] Chucky, the 'Good Guy' doll that was animated to be 'the archetypal killer puppet of late twentieth-century popular film' (*Child's Play* from 1988 with its three sequels), is a doll that becomes possessed with the spirit of a human killer, when he is shot in a toy store (Nelson, 2001, 258).

[7] "Charlie McCarthy was brought to life by carpenter and ventriloquist dummy maker, Theodore Mack at the request of a teenage Edgar Bergen." For more on Charlie McCarthy, see: http://www.charliemccarthy.org/.