

Entry

# Adult Play with Character Toys

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## Definition

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

**Keywords:** adult play; character toys; playability; materiality; affect; world-building; storytelling; photoplay; toyism; toy activism

## 1. Introduction to Character Toys

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

This entry draws its ideas mainly from the interdisciplinary fields of toy and play research, linking cultural and media studies and research on fandoms with theoretical



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perspectives highlighted in the areas of design, psychology, market research, and critical theory. Renowned scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith [5], characterizes play through seven rhetorics, including identity and imagination, highlighting how toy play in adulthood spans cultural, psychological, and expressive dimensions. Consequently, adult play is contextualized not only as a cultural practice and consumer behavior but also as an activity and form of material, visual, social, and digital interaction closely tied to identity work, explained by psychological factors.

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

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

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

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

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

Notably, the toy industry also provides materials for DIY creation and customization of character toys through construction sets, such as LEGO, and tabletop role-playing figurines (TTRPGs), which relate to miniaturizing [9]. Moreover, DIY cultures associated with, for example, amigurumi plush and doll customization have inspired and utilized offerings from the toy industry, with commercial versions of crocheted toys and customized Blythe dolls made available, e.g., in outlets such as Etsy. Finally, the category of *designer toys* [8] characterized by Steinberg as collectible art objects in toy form, are created by artists and toy designers producing limited editions that represent another dimension of character toys.

This entry addresses character toys as material beings, leaving out analyses of digital versions of 'toyified' game characters [10], as well as adult "toys" with sexual connotations,

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Toys and Adulthood

Contemporary play may take many forms. It can be solitary or social, embedded in the physical, digital, or imaginative, and engaged in by players of different ages, including individuals from other generations. To working adults, play is often perceived as a form of recreation. However, Giddens notes that there is no reason to start calling it “recreation” rather than “play” [15]. Firat and Venkatesh compare the concept of play with that of consumption, noting their similarities in the public and private spheres, as well as in the contexts of home and workplace, labor and leisure, and child and adult [16].

This entry focuses on a specific category of playthings, namely toys. Indeed, a great deal of play in the 21st century involves the consumption of various structured play materials, specifically character toys. However, at the same time, this engagement also manifests as creative and thus productive acts involving handicrafts and technologies, regardless of the player’s age.

As illustrated in the entry, and leaning on a lens borrowed from critical theory, character toys may be read as both instruments of cultural reproduction and tools of subversion, allowing adults to follow—or challenge—dominant scripts of identity, gender, and consumption, nowadays even the blurring boundaries of forms of serious, casual, and project-based leisure as discussed by Stebbins [17] and recreation carried out in childhood and adulthood.

The boundary between child and adult play is historically and culturally constructed, and can be analyzed through various lenses, including developmental, psychological, cultural, and even biological perspectives. The entry at hand uses a sociomaterial and sociocultural perspective to outline key characteristics of adult play with character toys by integrating its dimensions and practices. Contemporary adult engagement with toys destabilizes fixed notions of developmental progression, inviting more flexible and pluralistic models of adulthood where play is not outgrown but recontextualized.

Alemany Oliver highlights the existence of a playful consumer society that allows adult consumers to play without shame and describes the shift from ludic to paidic consumption as a move from “established rules of consumption to spontaneous desire to play with consumption” [18]. Here, previous understandings of play and playthings among adults demonstrate how creation, consumption, and production coexist in contemporary forms of adult play with character toys, currently labeled by media and the toy industry as “kidultism”.

According to InsightTrendsWorld reporting in 2025 [19], adults as toy buyers now represent 28% of the global toy market, illustrating the growing significance of adults as a target group for toys, simultaneously reflecting a broader cultural shift toward legitimizing adult leisure and creative expression through toys.

“Kidults” and mature toy enthusiasts who, as active agents in an era described as ludic [5], have come to illustrate how a growing number of adults express interest in paidic [20] activities and consumption patterns: Urban Dictionary defines a kidult (a blend of “kid” and “adult”) as “an adult that prefers items that society deems are for a younger person. An adult who plays with toys or games” [21].

Paidic (from Latin *paidi*, child) refers to spontaneous, free-form, unstructured play. It is exploratory, improvisational, and expressive, characteristic of early childhood play and often associated with creativity and emotional expression. Ludic (from the Latin *ludus*, meaning “game”) refers to structured, rule-based, and goal-oriented play. It emphasizes strategy, competition, mastery, and performance, often found in games, puzzles, or systems of formalized play. Adult play with character toys often oscillates between paidic expression—improvised storytelling, affective interaction—and ludic structuring, such as

staged photoplays or collectible taxonomies. These dual dynamics reflect Caillois' [20] distinction between the spontaneous (*paidia*) and rule-bound (*ludus*) dimensions of play.

While adult play with character toys is categorized under the label of *kidultism*—used to describe adult engagement with childhood-themed objects—this industry and media-based framing can oversimplify the nuanced cultural, emotional, and creative functions of such play. Here, the reductive implications of the term are critically considered, emphasizing that adult players are not regressing into childhood but rather redefining adulthood through aesthetic, affective, and narrative practices.

In her doctoral dissertation originating from 2013, Heljakka [2] profiled four types of adult players of toys ranging from those with a serious or professional reason to engage with toys—toy collectors, toy designers, and 'artists toying' (meaning artists who use mass-marketed toys as a material resource for inspiration and a basis for art making)—to the 'everyday players' referring to adults with no industrial or professional linkage to toy engagements. However, this work highlighted the overlap between the profiles, noting for example, that some toy collectors also interact playfully with their collections, and that toy designers and toying artists often have toy collections of their own. In this entry, attention is directed towards the fourth profile—*everyday players*—toy aficionados, enthusiasts, and fans, often labeled by the media as 'kidults'.

Rather than representing immaturity, toy play in "kidulthood" reflects a participatory, identity-driven cultural logic, where adults consciously integrate toys into self-making, playful lifestyles, fandom, and critical engagement. Rehak emphasizes that fans and collectors often define their identities through material artifacts, such as toys [22]. Therefore, "kidultism" is not a denial of maturity but a flexible, self-authored mode of adulthood. Lundy's ethnographic studies of adult collectors of toys examine how material fandom evolves across generations, shedding light on long-term identity formation [23]. Geraghty shows that mature toy collectors use toys for nostalgia, trade, and community display, transforming them into focal points for storytelling and cultural belonging [24].

Similar to the ideas presented in this entry, Godwin argues that character toys function as material storytellers, conveying meaning through design, display, and fan interaction [25]. Keidl highlights the mediation of action figures as playthings: fans interpret these toys not only through their link to a narrative text but also through their material and functional qualities, such as articulation, scale, and textural design [26].

By exploring the emotional, sociomaterial, and sociocultural dimensions of character toys, this entry examines how toy play in adulthood functions across various domains—private and public, therapeutic and recreational, aesthetic and political. The dimensional model of the toy experience [27] and additional insights into *miniaturizing*, *photoplay*, *toyism*, and *toy activism* provide a robust foundation for a multidimensional analysis of toy play with character toys conducted in adulthood.

### 3. Theoretical Framework: The Dimensions of the Toy Experience

The theoretical framework of the Dimensions of the Toy Experience, conceptualized by the author in earlier work, provides an interdisciplinary lens for analyzing adult engagement with toys, particularly in the context of character toys. By identifying a set of interrelated dimensions, the framework acknowledges the complex interplay between the toys' design and the narrative, emotional, and social aspects of toy play.

In the framework, six dimensions that structure adult engagement with character toys are identified as follows: *physical*, *functional*, *fictional*, *affective* [27], *temporal*, and *social*. The physical and functional dimensions relate to tactility, articulation, and portability, which determine how toys are handled and manipulated in play. In essence, the toy's

physical properties, aesthetics, and functional mechanics enable it to be considered from the perspective of *object play*.

Despite the rapid technologization of play cultures, the visuality combined with the materiality of character toys remains their key characteristic. While dolls, action figures, and soft toys may have a digital presence, for example, on social media platforms, their physicality, tactility, and three-dimensionality, including their relation to spatiality, are the main reasons for the human interest in having and holding them, organizing, arranging, and making configurations of toys, and assemblages consisting of toys and technologies, for example, involving the affordances of digital cameras, smartphones, and social media platforms as ‘play machines’ that enable documentation and sharing of toy play [11].

The fictional dimension encompasses the narrative potential embedded in a toy’s design or symbolic association, often as the foundation for *world-building* and *world play* [11]. The affective and temporal dimensions reflect toy lifecycles, emotional attachment to toys, and their relation to lifelong play. In contrast, the social dimension includes displaying and dramatized storytelling through photoplay (or toy photo- and videography) shared within communities. This framework illustrates how toy play is deeply embodied and networked, shaped by material, social, and digital interactions.

#### 4. Character Toys and Value Creation in Play

*Playability* involves a toy’s design affordances and its capacity to be reinterpreted through imaginative and creative use. *Playability* is a central concept in understanding how value is created through toy play, particularly in the context of adult interaction with toys. Playability emerges as a relational quality of toys, realized through the dynamic interaction between toy design, player imagination, and the surrounding sociocultural context.

As Levinovitz argues, “a toy is an invitation to play with its identity” [28], emphasizing toys’ openness to reinterpretation. Sicart also conceptualizes play as expressive appropriation: “We play with things not because of what they are, but because of what they mean to us” [29]. What could be added here is that we also engage with things to make them more meaningful through play for others and ourselves.

The stages in the life cycle of toy relations can be understood through the continuum of *wow*, *flow*, and *glow* [2]. First, we are wowed by the toys, which is a response to their enthrallment—a combination of novelty and aesthetics that speaks to toy enthusiasts and fans. If their invitation to play is realized, toys, when used in play, help us enter a flow experience. This means the toys are perceived to have *play value* due to their playability. In character toys, the play value consists of playability and *displayability* [2].

Playability contributes to the values experienced in toy play. It highlights how adult players co-create meaning through their use of both physical and digital contexts. Giddings’ work on distributed agency affirms that toys act as co-performers in play, embedded within techno-cultural systems [30].

Lastly, if the playability and value of toys are sustained, they gain long-term value, which is reflected in their glow. The glow in the toys acknowledges that these objects have been used in play and that play with them has left a physical mark or patina, signaling that they have fulfilled their primary purpose of being played with. Glow may also manifest as part of the storytelling generated for the toy, which is conveyed through visual and textual narratives that capture facets of the toy’s personality and ‘life experiences’.

Materiality is central to the perceived play value of toys, as toy play represents an object play practice [2]. Karana et al. discuss how material experiences, such as tactility and texture, shape emotional engagement [31]. Hansen notes that materials inspire interaction [32], while Chapman highlights that materials that age well foster emotionally durable attachments [33]. Media scholar Kline notes that toys acquire symbolic content

and meaning within a social context [34]. In toy cultures, players generate play knowledge as they recall, recreate, and replay historical narratives associated with the objects of their interest. In this entry, we connect these ideas to sustainable toy designs, illustrating how the material longevity of toys, or endurance, supports their long-term play value.

## 5. Types of Toy Engagement Among Adults

Today's character toys fascinate enthusiasts of all ages because they offer numerous opportunities for wonder and exploration through tangible and transmedia experiences. When approached creatively as part of solitary play, they become essential tools for their players in self-expression and identity work. Unlike games that are *played*, toys gain meaning and significance when they are *played with*, especially when it comes to character-type toys [2].

The types of toy engagements among adults are manifold, ranging from normative to creative and subversive toy usage, and the interactions and activities with character toys take place both in online and offline environments. Through social (media) sharing, they offer many possibilities for social object play through shared storytelling. As lifestyle objects, emblems of fandom, and even office toys, or desktop companions, they are played and displayed as part of work life. The most prominent forms of toy engagements are toy collecting, customization, creative storytelling, and critique expressed through political usage—namely, *toy activism*. These types of toy engagements in adulthood will be examined in more detail in the following sections.

### 5.1. Character Toy Collecting

Aesthetic, emotional, and archival considerations often drive toy collecting among adults. Adults collect toys as part of their leisure, lifestyle, and fandoms—to display them, create dioramas, and narrate doll (or toy) dramas [11]. Collectors curate based on personal themes, values, or nostalgia, turning toys into autobiographical assemblages. However, adults are not only interested in (re)collecting their childhood through historical character toys. The collections of contemporary adults as toy enthusiasts often include various categories of character toys—vintage, retro, and novel designs.

Earlier research highlights the complexities around collecting and (non-)play but also situates collecting as a form of play [35]. As argued in earlier toy theory, adult interactions with character toys go far beyond accumulation. Toy collecting emerges as a multifaceted cultural practice that involves both non-play motivations and play activities. The collection of toys resembles ludic and game-oriented activities, such as hunting for toys from second-hand markets, and engaging in 'gambling-like' dynamics for new additions to the collection, achieved by unboxing their blind boxes (or sealed packages in which the exact contents are randomized or hidden), or Gashapon, Japanese capsule toys dispensed via vending machines, which seek to produce enduring play value through surprise mechanics in acquiring characters in miniature format [36].

While "hardcore" toy collectors interested in the 'mint-condition' of these objects, acquire toys for the purpose of investment, and therefore goal-oriented, or ludic types of play, more playful forms of collecting toys entail the possibility of material and imaginative engagement with the objects, meaning that toy characters are unboxed and released to become part of paidic play as artifacts that are used creatively for the sake of emotional bonding with the toys as well as self-expression and social interaction with them [2]. For "softcore" toy collectors, the value of character toys found, for example, in thrift stores is driven by other types of interest, such as the quest to find and salvage quirky, unusual, and even broken toys from the market, thereby preserving historical toy cultures. Following Belk [7], the emotional investment in collecting and customizing toys, as discussed in

the following, may be an extension of the self, where toys become vehicles of identity performance beyond childhood.

### 5.2. Customization Practices

Adults are considerate about investing resources—finances, space, and time—in their toy activities, which means forming long-term relationships with their character toys and associated world-building materials. In the toy play of adults, toys are personalized through various object play practices.

Adult players engage in craft-intensive customization, transforming toys through material experimentation and personal expression. Customization and other forms of reappropriation deepen the interaction with toys, as repainting, sculpting, and re-clothing transform mass-produced figures into unique, expressive objects. Doll lines, such as Barbie, Pullip, Makie, and Blythe, as well as action figures like G.I. Joe, role-playing figurines, and character toy animals from series like Sylvanian Families, are popular types of toys used for customization practices among adults. In the category of designer and art toys, specific characters, like Munny, are designed as blank canvases, or *platform toys*, allowing for full customization practices, including painting, sculpting, or other forms of modification [8].

Customization reflects Sicart's framing of play as appropriation [29], reminding us of Jenkins' [37] notion on how media convergence enables fans to remix and expand fictional worlds, which in the context of this entry manifest as character toys with related worlds, fictional, physical, and materialized not only with the help of the imagination and fantasy, but adult learning and skill-building that happens through engagement with things, tools, technologies, and various materials. Chapman emphasizes that materials gaining meaning over time promote deeper bonds [33]. Meriläinen et al. further argue that customization is both a sustainability gesture and a form of identity work [38].

### 5.3. Plotted Toy Play: Toy Dramas and Narrative Cultivation

Narrative creation and cultivation are central to the engagement of many adult players with dolls, action figures, role-playing figurines, and plush toys, particularly through toy dramas—episodic, visual, or written stories enhanced by character toys.

Giddings notes that toys are actors in media ecologies [26], while Heljakka and Harvainen describe doll dramas as spaces for storytelling, identity exploration, and emotional projection [11]. Meriläinen, Stenros, and Heljakka discuss how miniaturizing exemplifies this narrative engagement, combining crafting, collecting, and storytelling into immersive worlds [6]. These narratives often extend into social media, where they gain visibility, feedback, and a community.

### 5.4. Character Toy Aesthetics and Visually Oriented Play

Earlier research illustrates how, as witnessed on social media photo-sharing applications, toys are becoming increasingly documented as part of play: adult play with character toys is often grounded in toy photography and videography—a visual, material, and socio-technological practice involving toys and digital technologies [8].

*Photoplay*—the staging and photographing of toys—is a significant avenue of the toy interaction of adults. As earlier research [2] described, photoplay merges aesthetic display, narrative development, and digital performance. Portability, poseability, and photogeneity play key roles in visually oriented play, allowing toys to travel across locations and become narrative anchors in real-world settings through toy tourism, or *toyism* [8].

*Portability* is an essential feature of character toys, making them easy to carry. The scale of the toy has importance for play: while more bulky character toys such as IKEA plushies, Squishmallows, and large versions of transmedia toys, such as Disney's Stitch are popular interior decoration elements among adults, the portability of the character toy

increases its play value, as it can be brought along, taken outdoors, traveled with, and displayed in the domestic space as part of decoration, displays, and dioramas.

The toys' *poseability* refers to their articulation, e.g., jointed body parts, which makes it possible to increase the toys' expressivity. Even the simplest plastic toy figurines enhance their play value when they can be posed in various ways, such as by turning or tilting their head. Movable necks, hands, and feet add to the toy's posture, extending its perceived liveness.

*Photogeneity* refers to the toys' overall aesthetics and ability to 'look good on camera.' This dimension is essential for continued interest and prolonged play value for adults engaged with character toys. An expressive 'face' is necessary for any character toy: Steinberg claims, "Within character merchandising, the facialized entity of the character [...] must be easily recognizable." [8] (p. 222). Alternatively, there can be character toys with a blank face, upon which players can project or customize their preferred facial features. These toys bear a resemblance to the platform of designer toys, as discussed by Steinberg. Examples of this are Eero Aarnio's sculptural toy furniture, featuring animal forms, which is popular among players of all ages.

The importance of being *photo-playable*, with attributes such as portability, poseability, and photogeneity, evokes human desire to narrate the toy personalities' adventures in the world as part of stories and even toy dramas that can be explained through the concept of world play. In this activity, adults create miniature worlds for the toys to inhabit or stage the toys in real-world environments.

Giddings' concept of distributed agency [30] is evident here: toys act within staged scenes as semi-autonomous characters. This is amplified in mobile contexts, such as toyism, where traveling toys operate as travel companions and identity symbols.

### 5.5. Solitary and Social Play with Character Toys

The toy play of adults encompasses aesthetic, affective, intellectual, and therapeutic forms of engagement, which can be partaken of solitarily and socially. The motivation for adults' interest in character toys is multifaceted: adults acquire toys for reasons that are both solitary and social. They adorn their lifestyles, and the placement of these toys in the domestic space or the office signals the aesthetic preferences of their owners and players. Plush characters offer comfort and emotional regulation, while articulated dolls, figures, and figurines serve as visual composition, world-building, and world-playing tools [11].

Alongside their aesthetic features, character toys are often three-dimensional in form—they are made of various materials, including plastic, rubber, wood, metals, glass, yarn, and textiles. The materiality of character toys is significant in terms of interactions with them. Additionally, in the toy cultures of adults, interactions occur in a non-material sense: toys are bonded through perceived companionship—adults may engage in silent dialogues with their trusted 'toyfriends,' create multidimensional backstories for these toys, and cultivate their personalities through this affectively and intellectually emerging process. Drawing on Winnicott [39], the toy play of adults may be seen as a continuation of transitional object use, where toys mediate emotional regulation, fantasy, and stability in changing life contexts. Winnicott's psychological theory suggests that certain toys, like plush character toys, serve as emotional support. In this way, toys may contribute to human well-being, even resiliency. To exemplify, a study from 2024 [40], Ko et al. found that even in adulthood, tactile engagement with objects enhances physiological markers of emotional recovery under stress, underscoring the emotional and therapeutic value of toy engagements among adults. Ignacio and Cupchik [41] find that adult doll play may serve as a mode of emotional regulation and fantasy-based coping, reinforcing the affective and narrative affordances of

character toys. Chapman's theory of emotional durability [33] applies here: the joy of toy interaction often stems from a toy's ability to evoke and sustain narrative depth over time.

Whereas the portability, poseability, and photogeneity are particularly important for action figures, miniatures, and dolls, plush toys encompass different qualities that add to their meaningfulness as part of intimate adult object relations. Most prominently, character toys in the form of plush figures are cuddled and hugged. Digital characters on screens or toys manufactured of hard materials do not possess this affordance of 'huggability.' [2].

While character toys have personal meaning and intimate significance for their owners, they can also serve as social communicators when made public spokespersons. Through toys, it is possible to convey personal histories and comment on current phenomena, as was performed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when teddy bears were displayed in window screens in many countries as part of the teddy challenge, an instantiation of pandemic toy play [11]. Through these manifestations of toy engagement among adults, playing with character toys supports well-being, identity affirmation, and playful resilience, as noted in research, which formulates character toys as *objects of resilience* [11].

### 5.6. Political Use of Character Toys

The history of character toy engagements demonstrates their significance as symbols of altruism and camaraderie during challenging periods. For instance, character toys, such as teddy bears, are frequently regarded as elements of public mourning [42]. Nonetheless, their utilization in conveying messages of solidarity and hope underscores the importance and role of character toys within proactive initiatives, a concept similarly explored in research as toy activism.

According to Fiske [43], popular culture offers a site for "semiotic productivity," or reinterpretation by audiences, where fans of media texts, understood here as players, create resistant meanings from mass-produced media, such as character toys. Adult play with character toys, including cultural critique in the form of toy activism, can be read as a bottom-up reinterpretation of cultural commodities.

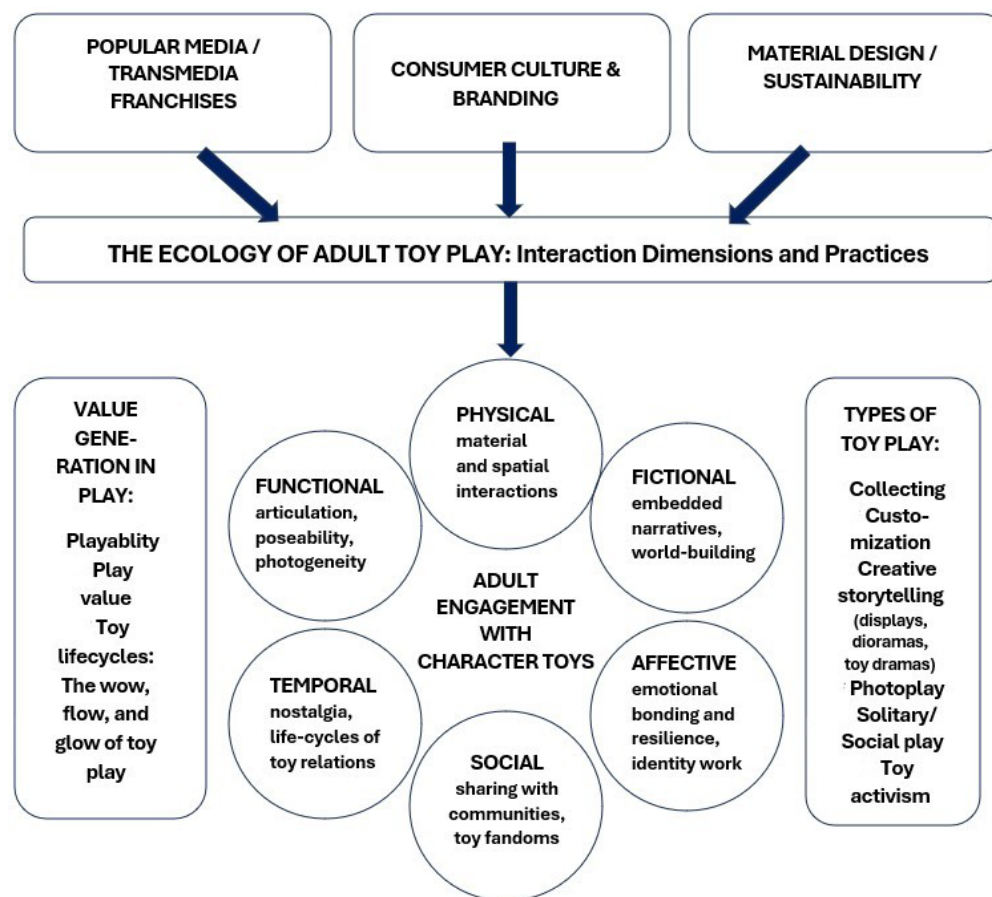
Toy activism represents a serious form of adult play that is deliberate and goal-oriented. While it can be linked to ludic play in its orientation, the manifestations of toy activism may vary, and come to encompass paidic nuances. In the toy industry, character toys are intentionally designed and marketed to promote social, political, and cultural messages. Examples include Barbie, with its "Inspiring Women" series, cultural reappropriations, such as the 'queering' of Barbie as investigated by Rand in pioneering work [44], and more recently, the *Barbie Movie* (2023) by Greta Gerwig, which satirically critiques patriarchy, corporate feminism, and identity expectations within Barbie's universe [45].

In play, toy-based visual protests utilize the disarmingly innocent appearance of toys to comment on contemporary societal issues. In contemporary toy cultures, adult players utilize toys for satire, critique, and protest. This public and political pattern of adult play with character toys involves harnessing character toys, such as dolls, action figures, and animal characters, including various soft toys and figurines, to make visible or promote a political, ethical, or empathetic goal.

Adult players use toys to comment on warfare, consumerism, gender norms, or environmental issues, performing critique through playful, symbolic acts. Toy activism has manifested in statements made by adult players campaigning for gender equality and diversity, animal rights, and against racism. Recent examples of toy activism include Williamson's Art Activist Barbie, who, through playful and humorous interventions conducted in art museums and on related social media, has campaigned for gender equality in art representation [46]. Using character toys in this way aligns with Sicart's idea of play as carnivalesque and resistant [29].

## 6. Conclusions

Adult play with character toys is a multifaceted, legitimate cultural practice. Through collecting, customizing, and creative storytelling, as well as engaging critically with activist causes, toys become agents of self-expression, critique, and emotional exploration. The materiality of toys—the design, feel, and durability—is central to their playability, ongoing play value, and the play knowledge generated by players through documentation and sharing of toy play. The ecology of adult play with toys with dimensional aspects and play practices with character toys, as discussed in this entry, is captured in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Adult play with character toys: interaction dimensions and practices.

As illustrated through the theoretical ideas on toy play as represented in the work of Heljakka, Meriläinen et al., Sicart, Giddings, and Levinovitz, the toy play of adults is not about regression, but rather about progressive and proactive cultural production. This future-oriented quality of toys is reflected in the design of character toys, in particular, as well as in the interactions with them, which mirror human society and culture in their various manifestations.

### 6.1. Limitations

This entry sought to define and explain aspects of adult play with character toys, relying on previous research related to toys and play. This entry leaves room for further exploration of the character toy play of adults, as it does not fully engage with topics such as the limitations of these toys as play objects, nor gender perceptions, (human) inclusivity, intersectionality, or sex toys often connected with the idea of adult object play. These areas represent fruitful avenues for further research related to toy engagements in adulthood.

To specify, while character toys offer rich opportunities for narrative and affective engagement, they also present distinct limitations as play objects. Material constraints, such as fragility, limited articulation, or scale, can impact the longevity of toys through their perceived play value, as these factors may inhibit tactile interaction. In contrast, the toys' backstories may restrict the imaginative flexibility of some players. Additionally, the collectible status of many character toys encourages preservation over play, reinforcing their role as display items rather than richly playable objects.

While some representational aspects of character toys, such as their perceived gender, have been left out of the analysis, observations made in earlier research [2] note how the backstories as part of the aesthetics and storytelling of dolls, action figures, and figurines often hint at the toy's gender, whereas plush toys, and animal-themed and fantasy-oriented plush toys in particular are often considered as gender neutral. Simultaneously, the question of assigning gender to the toys is for the (adult) players to decide.

Another limitation of the entry is that it does not discuss recent developments in character toy design and marketing with a focus on (human) inclusivity, nor its implications on adult play with character toys. Inclusivity in character toy design reflects growing awareness of the need for toys to represent diverse identities, bodies, and experiences. To illustrate, over the past decade, toy brands such as Mattel have introduced dolls with diverse skin tones, body types, and disabilities, including, most recently, a Barbie doll with diabetes. This development is speculated to foster affective identification, challenge normative ideals, and support more inclusive and, therefore, sustainable, play cultures.

Additionally, intersectional approaches to the topic would suggest that adult play with character toys is not universally accessible or equally valorized—economic privilege, gender norms, and racialized stereotypes often limit who is allowed to play visibly in public space. The cultural stigma still surrounding adult play with toys may further constrain expressive engagement, making toy play a more mediated and anonymized practice. Thus, even as character toys invite creative appropriation, their form, context, and framing could potentially circumscribe the possibilities for play.

Finally, the category of “adult toys” falls outside the scope of the entry, even though many sex toys of current times express toyified aesthetics, borrowing color schemes, kawaii ‘cuteness,’ forms, and materials recognized from character toy design.

## 6.2. Envisioning Future Character Toys

To conclude, it is essential to envision the future of character toy development that will impact adult play cultures. The future of character toys is poised to see new toy phenomena emerge at the intersections of material, visual, social, and technological realms. Art, design, fashion, and lifestyles connected to social media are expected to have a profound impact on future toys. Most centrally, rapid evolution of technology, as well as digital play cultures and the development of artificial intelligence embedded in robotics, will drive the evolution of the character toy medium.

Toy trends of the past decade, greatly influenced by social media phenomena, have inspired play and other forms of technological development, including generative artificial intelligence as part of digital and physical characters, which can be understood under the terms “Viral Toys” and “AIToys”. These categories are of interest when addressing adult play with character toys, as the toys in both areas most often represent ‘characters’ with facial features, a prescribed personality, and the ability to interact with and move players cognitively, imaginatively, and physically through language, lights, sound, and sensor technology.

*Viral Toys* are toys that gain rapid and widespread popularity through digital platforms, especially social media, due to their strong visual appeal, emotional resonance,

collectible nature, and online shareability. Their toys often transcend traditional play by engaging adults in aesthetic, affective, and performative forms of toy play, becoming cultural phenomena in their own right. Examples of recent Viral Toys include Sonny Angel and Labubu toys.

*AIToys* are interactive play objects embedded with artificial intelligence (AI), enabling adaptive, autonomous, and personalized experiences through learning, perception, and decision-making. These toys utilize AI techniques, including machine learning, natural language processing, computer vision, and robotics, to engage users dynamically. They respond to stimuli in real-time and evolve based on user interactions.

Examples of existing *AIToys* include character-based ones such as Ropet and Grok. Still, *speculative toy fiction* envisions many more examples of possible future AI-empowered toys, including artificial ‘toyfriends,’ such as M3gan and Klara, known from cinematic and literary fiction, with previously unseen features related to tangible interfaces (e.g., screen and sensor technologies) mediating the interaction between the player and the toy and shaping future play patterns. Through these speculative narratives, it is possible to glimpse what the future of character toy development and related toy engagements might hold in an increasingly connected world inhabited by non-human beings.

In the Century of Play, character-themed toys—mass-marketed, crafted, born of designer cultures, or AI-enabled ‘toyfriends’—function as tactile and psychological objects and media for identity work, narrative engagement, and social connection, affirming the depth and richness of both ludic and paidic as well as solitary and social adult play with character toys.

In the first decades of the 21st century, as the Century of Play, adults may have cracked the doors of their toy closets open. Future developments will reveal whether creative and critical, entertaining, educational, and work-related adult engagement with character toys—and their manifold relations to digital play practices, as well as embodied, spontaneous, or physical play—will further alleviate the traces of stigma and perceived childishness of toy play that still linger around adult play with character toys—and position them as legitimate and positive play partners for adults, regardless of age.

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