

Toys, Comics and Transmedia Play: Tracing the connections between multidimensional storytelling and playability

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Introduction: Toys, comics and their shared strategies of storytelling

AN INDUSTRIALLY PRODUCED TOY MAY NOT COME TO EXISTENCE without a two-dimensional image: Often, a three-dimensional toy character first exists as a two-dimensional sketch or as part of a story-world from other media. On the contrary, a two-dimensional comic come to fruition without any three-dimensional, or ‘toyish’ manifestations. Nevertheless, the historical development of these two narrative and popular media—toys and comics—are entangled in a web of shared meanings and tightly woven intertextual relationships.

This theoretical essay explores the similarities and differences between the two-dimensional, juxtaposed and serial image (comics), three-dimensional, material objects (toy), and the interplay between these interwoven, visual, material and fictional universes. The essay expands upon my previous work to explore the *toyification of culture*.¹ ‘the mediation of things and the ‘thingification of media’ (Lash and

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 55, No. 5, 2022

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Lury), the hybrid relations of comics to physical toys with their connections to transmedia, character-based storytelling, and finally, inter-generationally emerging play. As a toy researcher, I aim on the one hand, to form an understanding of the differences and similarities of character-based storytelling inherent in these two types of media. On the other hand, my goal is to open a dialogue between comics, toys—words, images, objects, their hybrid relations—and their potential openness to interpretation, play and interplay in the 21st century.

There are parallels in the trajectories of, especially regarding the historical developments of these narrative devices in both their close relationships to stories and employment of characters. In terms of characters, comics and toys share the capability to feed our imaginations, visually and narratively.

The starting point for this analysis is the preconception that toys and comics, as vehicles for storytelling, character-based media, *and* transmedia phenomena—despite their integral differences—still have a lot in common. One commonality is the universal appeal of representations of human and non-human entities, and the sometimes abstract and cartoony characterization of beings that add to the possibilities of the reader or player to see themselves in the toys and comics. However, toys and comics are not the same, as the first medium represents a world of three-dimensional and multisensory objects, whereas the other, traditionally, relies on ‘flat’ images. One key difference between comics and toys, then, is their relation to physical manipulation and as artefacts with different relations to *playability* (see Table 1).

Whereas comics are imaginatively flexible, they are not as flexible in their physicality. Writing about familiar characters from anime and manga, Marc Steinberg notes that ‘they cannot be turned around

Table 1
A comparison of general properties of comics and toys

Comics	Toys (dolls, action figures, soft toys)
Two-dimensional	Three-dimensional
Character-based storytelling	Character-based storytelling
Readable narratives	Readable (transmedia) backstories
Non-playable	Playable

and studied from any angle; they cannot be played with' (123). For Steinberg, the *playability* of an object means a physical exploration and manipulation of it. Because 2D images cannot be rotated physically, playful manipulation must happen in the reader's mind. The toyified 3D version of a character offers the player a tangible and articulated interface, and at the same time, some degree of control over an original image.

Indeed, our perceptions and experiences of an image and an object may not necessarily follow the same paths. What is the difference between a toy (even images of those very same toys) and comics?

Aspects of toys, comics, and their possible hybrids

This theoretical exploration of the shared worlds of toys and comics begins with a comparison of the early histories of comics and toys with emphases on their various transmedia relations. Let us start by looking at the definition of toys. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a toy as "An object for a child to play with, typically a model or miniature replica of something." Again, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the most universally known manifestation of comic-style storytelling, the comic strip, as "a sequence of drawings in boxes that tell an amusing story, typically printed in a newspaper or comic book" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Art historian David Kunzle lists four characteristics of comics: their sequential, separate images; a preponderance of image over text; a requirement for them to be published in a mass medium; and a moral and topical storyline (Kunzle 2, c.f. in Beaty 32).

Earlier research indicates contemporary toys' capability to function as visual, material, narrative, and communicational artefacts (Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)* 7). On the one hand, much of this has to do with the visual and material dimensions of playthings and images integrated into these objects. On the other hand, toys may be evaluated based on their physical, functional, fictional, and affective dimensions (Paavilainen and Heljakka 17). This conceptual map of toys' dimensions, functions as a basis for the comparison between toys and comics in the following section.

Physicality

Whereas both toys and comics are visual media, their materiality is different. When considering the connections between the 2D format of comics and 3D toys, it is important to address their relations to physical space and their dependence on material realities. A comic strip consists of very few panels. The panel is the only unit of encapsulation, its layout is normally rigid, and its composition is usually simple. A comic book, consists of many panels and the units of encapsulation include the panel, the page, the two-page spread, and inset panels. The layout of a comic book can be creative, and its composition can be complex (Duncan and Smith 6). In his book, *The Comics* (1947), Colton Waugh lists three elements of narrative content on the comic strip: a continuing character who becomes a reader's friend, and a sequence of pictures and speech included in "balloon lines" (Waugh 14).

The most universal character toys, meaning toys "with a face" and personalities, such as dolls, action figures, figurines, and various plush (or soft toys), are the simplest in terms of their physical forms. Simplicity guides many comic artists in ways that it intrigue toy designers. On the contrary, the flatness of a character (such as Hello Kitty) may work well in the 2D format, but less so as a 3D toy. In order for a flat character to become a toy, its materiality needs to take a form that invites multisensory manipulation—it needs to be plumped up, made bulky and *poseable*, or at least 'huggable' (Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*).

Functionality

In addition to the similarities between comic characters and toy characters, these storytelling media share other features. Functionality entails the use and suitability for a particular activity. In the most simple terms, the function of toys is to be *playable*, and for comics to be *readable*. These aspects will be discussed in more detail later in the essay. However, it is also necessary to consider a common functional trait of toys and comics, their *collectability*. As noted by Beaty, "in the comics field, one of the most rudimentary levels of participation is collecting" (Beaty 155). In the visual arts, collectors tend to organize their purchases around different logics (Beaty 157). Fans of toys and

comics also engage in similar practices that include collecting, competition, and community.

Comics present endless possibilities for *collectability*, as do toys. The allure of serial images is indisputable in both realms. Comics fans are interested in owning volumes or a series of works by a specific artist. For fans of toys, collecting printed items, such as trading cards and toy figures, is a common goal. Many companies work to create a collecting craze, at times even communicating it in marketing campaigns, such as the infamous case of the Pokémon trading cards that originated in the 1990s. Bandai, the company behind the Pokémon universe, showed great insight in choosing their slogan, “Gotta catch ‘em all!” (Blom).

Collecting is appealing to fans of many ages. The adult as a *toy collector* is also an industry formulated approach used to target mature fans (see e.g., Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*). Generally speaking, collectors are interested in the hunt for, the ownership and displaying of objects, and the admiration for the designers and artists responsible for creating the characters and the fantastic universes in which they reside.

Fictionality

The relationship of toys to narrativity is multidimensional. Jones (2017) notes that the fascination with toys has led us to breathe life into them across many different media. Toys, and character toys in particular, have the capability to function as vehicles for storytelling, and they have a connection to narratives through backstories. In narrative terms, toys are a powerful media, which make them lucrative characters in stories other than paratexts.² In some cases, toys are at the core of storytelling, representing the *main* text as part of toy tropes. “Toy tropes were first established in early toy narratives, invariably children’s books, and by the 21st century had solidified for audiences through picture books, comic strips, and films” (Gorman O’Neill 22).

One key aspect of both comic characters and toy “personalities” is their ability to function as reflections of us. Scott McCloud writes about the *universality* of cartoon imagery, explaining, the more *cartoony* a face, the more actual people it *describes* (30). Duncan and Smith discuss the role of generalization in creating characters: “Since

everything in comic books, including character, is reduced to two-dimensional images, the use of stereotypes is prevalent. A stereotype is a recognizable generalization of a type” (Duncan and Smith 135).

Importantly, since the end of the 20th century, comics have become more expressive, both in terms of their visuality and narrativity, which has led to the creation of more serious, complex and ambiguous personalities, and story worlds. The development is similar with dolls, action figures, and plush toys, which are understood here as *character toys*. Today, perhaps more than ever, toy characters may express a two-way development through either their cuteness or because of their twisted, even uncanny appearances, their proneness to reality, or because of the fantastic ways they speak to their players and afford various possibilities to identify with them. In this way, toy characters or character toys, become personalities in playful interaction as they are anthropomorphised due to the fact that they are seen as companions and confidants, even mirrors, and avatarial extensions to project our human identities on to (Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*).

Visuality is key to storytelling in comics as well. Groensteen, in his book, *The System of Comics* (2007), considers comics as a language because of the “mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it” (Groensteen 2; 6). Comics scholar, Harvey, writes:

[...] the pictures do not merely depict characters and events in a story; the pictures also add meaning – significance – to a story. The pictures are thus as much a part of the story as the plot line. No serious consideration of the art of the comics can overlook the narrative functions of pictures.

(Harvey 3)

Let us next explore how visuality and words are used to communicate narratives provided by toy professionals, toy designers, and companies. Playthings and words have a historical relation, one that connects with the developments of paper and printing technologies. According to media scholar, Dan Fleming, the ‘narrativization’ of toys begun with toy theatres (Fleming 83–84). Toy theatres, according to toy historian, Constance Eileen King, are thought to have developed from printing technologies: crib sheets and sets of figures.

The paper characters on the sheets started to be cut out by both children and adults in the late 18th century and were later sold with simple scenes (King).

As demonstrated, the stories of comics and toys unfold largely by visual means, but written texts also play a crucial part in how these media operate. For example, it is possible to find comics without words, but currently, it is almost impossible to think of toys without them. Character toys such as dolls, action figures, and various kinds of soft toys may, in their material appearances, communicate meanings derived from aesthetic approaches ranging from cute to uncanny that sometimes may seem hard to describe. Due to their relationships to transmedia and the “entertainment supersystem” (Kinder), contemporary toy characters originating from the 20th century onwards, come intertwined with written messages of sorts. This includes backstories provided by the toy makers, marketing messages spread across different media, and visual, textual, and verbal communications shared by toy fans of different ages on social media. Backstories expand upon the personalities and emotional states of toys in ways, which alone would be impossible for a static, three-dimensional object to convey. In the same way, as their “universes” motivate the reason for a toy character, the sidekick characters, accessories, buildings, and vehicles as both visually stimulating and otherwise narrativized elements, emphasize their characteristics in context. For followers and fans, these clues provide a launching pad for developing the toy stories further as part of imaginative play. In this way, narrativization of toys is a phenomenon that interests not only the designers and companies manufacturing and marketing toys, but also their users or players. This brings us to the last of the four categories: the *affective* dimension of the experiential space shared by comics and toys. An affective bond between users of both toys and comics is formed when these cultural products work well in terms of physicality, functionality, and fictionality.

Hybridity

A comic “is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together” (Groensteen 22). R.C. Harvey explains that comics are not a “simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true

mixture” (Harvey 9, c.f. in Beaty 32). This blending of two categories or mixtures is what scholars refer to as *hybridity*. Comics are clearly a hybrid medium, resulting from the merging of words and images.

History reveals that comics have been a *hybrid medium* from the start in that they are a unique combination of visual and textual narratives. Images, texts, characters, and plots have diversified in comics through their history as a result of artistry and experimental modes of execution. As Duncan and Smith point out, genres in comics have emerged from experimentation with hybrid forms (Duncan and Smith 217). For example, Beaty labels what comic artist, Gary Panter, has done for the medium, “anything comics” (151).

The hybridity between comics and toys, again, is due to their transmedia relations, or sharing of similar content. “One important fact about hybrid art forms is that they are often recognized as particularly complex works that unite disparate elements, thereby accruing values attached to each” (Beaty 21). Moreover, the connection between toys and comics manifests in a communicational web built around licensed characters and mash-ups of them.

More recently, comics have not only been influenced by developments of other storytelling media, but also digitalization. Today, comics are not only printed in books and newspapers, but also presented as webcomics or in gallery spaces in still images, or for example, enhanced with gif-animations—partial movement or sound effects. In the 21st century, hybrid media increasingly entail movement between the physical and the digital. A notable example is the digitally animated, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* comics. Hybridization between other forms of entertainment media has also interested scholars of various playthings, both digital and physical.

As will be demonstrated further, considering comics and toys together presents interesting possibilities to re-interpret actions of the reader/player. In other words, and in contrast to traditional thought, playability relates to both comics and toys. Table 2 includes a summary of traditional toys and comics and their hybrid forms.

The comics that became toys/The toys that became comics

As Beaty explains, comics have long been thought of as an *entertainment engine* (96). Increasingly, comics publishers are considered as

Table 2
Aspects of toys, comics, and examples of their hybrids—a comparison

Aspect of Medium	Traditional comics	Traditional toys	Multidimensional and transmedial hybrids	Examples of hybrids and toyification/comicfication
Physical dimension (visuality and materiality)	Two-dimensional, monosensory medium	Three-dimensional, multisensory medium	Two/three-dimensional, also a potentially digital medium	Motion comics (digitally animated comics) of <i>My Little Pony: Friendship is magic</i> (IDW/Comixology, 2013) <i>Example of digital comicfication</i>
Functional dimension (mechanics)	Readable Fiddle-factor (Turning the pages)	Seriality: Part of a series of toys Playable (e.g., poseable, collectable) Fiddle-factor (exploring the toys' multisensory affordances)	Playable/ Readable (Exploring the toys' multisensory affordances/turning or scrolling the pages)	Chris Ware's <i>Building Stories</i> Book-in-a-Box (Pantheon Books, 2012) <i>Example of toyification</i>
Fictional dimension (narrative)	Original narrative/transmedia relation Seriality: Serial images/storytelling	Backstory/transmedia relation	Backstory = original narrative Visual and material seriality	<i>Uglydolls Goin' Places</i> comicbook (VIZ Media, 2013) <i>Example of comicfication</i>
Affective dimension (Human reader/player/fan relationship)	Emotional relationship with fictional character/story-world	Emotional relationship with material object	Emotional relationship with combination of object and character	Fandom for character toys based on comics, e.g., Funko Pop! Vinyl Comic Cover: DC - Superman Action Comic (Funko/DC Comics, 2021) <i>Example of toyification</i>

“character and concept factories” (Smith and Duncan 147). For example, Beaty highlights *Peanuts* as a *multiplatform media property* that earned that status when it transitioned to television (Beaty 93).

As Duncan and Smith note, “the idea of licensing comic book characters for use in other media has gained increased momentum” (Duncan and Smith 105), because many comics based on characters are intrinsically *toyetic* in nature. According to Dan Fleming, author of *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (1996), “toyetic” is the suitability of a media property, such as a movie, for merchandising spin-off lines of licensed toys, games, and novelties. Scholars have long developed ideas around images and their media circulation. Recently, the interest has turned to the communication capability of things. Steinberg discusses things’ increasingly important role as a communication medium (87). “The materiality of the toy must accommodate the material properties of the [...] image for them to connect” (Steinberg 91). The communicative capacity of the toy-object as a medium, is in many cases, affected by and sometimes dependent on merchandising. However, how do characters come to existence before they see the daylight as toyified objects?

Contemporary toys are created as a result of developments in other realms of culture. In 1896, William Randolph Hearst published the first issue of the *American Humorist*, which featured the first modern comic strip, Richard F. Outcault’s, *The Yellow Kid* (Van Lente and Dunlavey 7). In approximately 1896, the Yellow Kid mechanical tipping hat toy became available for purchase. According to the Liveauctioneers website, in January 2015, one of the classic toys sold at auction for \$2,214.

Today, many popular toys are initially conceived on the drawing board. Before a toy materializes into a 3D plaything a designer must sketch and sculpt it. A globally recognized toy brand such as *My Little Pony* (*MLP*) was first a series of toys that later evolved into other entertainment media products. *MLP*, a series of character toys developed by Bonnie Zacherle, Charles Muenchinger, and Steve D’Aguanno, and marketed from 1982 onwards by Hasbro, has experienced an upswing in interest with the introduction of the 2010, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* animated television series, created by Lauren Faust. Due to the success of the *MPL* franchise, physical and digital versions of the comics, in addition to toys, are now sold in various commercial outlets.

Contemporary story-worlds are also crossing over in many other ways. Another classic example of an ‘epic’ transmedia connection, are the original *Star Wars* films and the comics and toys related to that universe. The “comicification” of *Star Wars* developed in parallel with the toyification of George Lucas’s *Star Wars*. With over 300 million *Star Wars* action figures sold between 1978–1985, toy manufacturer, Kenner, produced one of the most successful transmedia toy launches in history.

As Van Lente and Dunlavey demonstrate, the *Star Wars* transmedia merchandising was actually incredibly beneficial to the films. However, the immense sums of money generated from the sale of comics is not discussed nearly as often. “The comic *Star Wars* #1 came out before the movie and became the first newsstand comic since the 1940s to sell more than one million copies per issue” (Van Lente and Dunlavey 150).

Character toys play their part in plotted stories

According to Gorman, toy tropes are developed and reinforced throughout mid-20th century by picture books (3). Written and illustrated narratives, both fictive and fact-based, have had an undeniable impact on the emergence of character toys. According to Steinberg, character goods allow for inter or intragenerational human communication (90). Character toys, in particular, often emerge from literature, visual arts, graphic design, comics, movies, and the fashion industry, and inspire consumers to use various types of storytelling to take these narratives further. A contemporary character toy almost always comes with a brand, a name and a personality of which the backstory gives clues. Nevertheless, when considering, for example, the Uglydolls plush toy characters, the sketch for the toy that came before the transmedia story-world, not an appearance in a comic book or movie. The backstory of the Uglydolls toys launched in 2001, and later expanded in comics with the launch of the *Goin’ Places* comic book in 2013.

Toys, as a category of pop cultural play material, can be said to allow comics, as a form of storytelling, to extend beyond the printed format into the world of 3D objects. One of the most prevalent categories of toys that have been presented in reference to comics in the

past decennium are *designer toys*. As Vartanian explains, designer toys “are essentially toys for kids of all ages that are designed, manufactured, produced or even distributed by the artists and artisans” (Vartanian 6). Sometimes, designer toys are referred to as *art toys*:

...many of the new wave generation of American cartoonists affiliated with *RAW*, the most traditional highbrow comics magazine ever published in the United States, have crossed over to the production of art toys, including Ware, Kaz, Charles Burns (with Sony Creative Products), and, of course, Gary Panter.

(Beaty 150)

Beaty writes that “the transformation of the reputation of toys affects not only the field of lowbrow art but the tangential field of comics as well” (Beaty 149). He describes both categories as traditionally neglected cultural forms that may benefit from convergence otherwise impossible for either form individually (Beaty 150).

Designer toys present much wider possibilities for storytelling than traditional, mass-produced, character toys. Consequently, designer toys are sometimes more akin to art objects than action figures. Nevertheless, as playthings, designer toys are not only sculptural display-items, but at best, provoke playful dialogues and action in the hands and imaginations of their players. On the other hand, displaying is also a form of playing in which toy objects are posed and arranged in dioramas or room boxes, with or without other (play) things.

Beaty makes a distinction between *traditional* comics toys (such as action figures based on e.g. Marvel’s characters) and comics art toys. These two categories differ in terms of their distribution systems. Traditional comic toys are mostly sold in comic book stores, whereas the latter may be found in more specialized art stores and galleries (Beaty 149).

From transmedia relations to transgenerational appeal

“Licensed toys afford a material version of transmedia storytelling, and their relationship to the creation in meaning in transmedia franchises cannot be underestimated” (Harvey 161). Often, toys operate

as playthings that allow players to physically engage with the fantasy (Geraghty *Back to that Special Time*).

A *transmedia fantasy* may have its beginnings in various media (Jenkins). Today, perhaps more than ever, 3D toys are created because of trends occurring in visual media, fashion, and popular culture. On the other hand, toys inspire many artists and creators who conceive of their own characters and story worlds in either their physical or digital manifestations.

Both comics and toys exist within a universe of *transmedia storytelling* that constitutes one area of the ecology of the supersystem of play. According to Henry Jenkins, a “transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 97–98).

Indeed, toys inspire comic artists, but perhaps more importantly, enable new toys to enter the market when comic characters are *toyified*. The discussion concerning the relationship between comics and toys seems to be particularly relevant in times when the devaluation of comics as a cultural form is slowly decreasing, and juxtaposed, serial images as comic stories are receiving more recognition as an art form, and not only as children’s literature (Beaty 38–39).

Previously, as comics scholar Thierry Groensteen has observed, comics have suffered from a number of “handicaps.” First, they have been understood as a ‘bastard genre’ between text and image. Second, they are intrinsically infantile and have been consumed by adults wishing to prolong their adolescence. Third, comics have been associated with caricature, a degraded branch of visual arts. Fourth, they have not been integrated in the development of visual arts throughout the 20th century. Finally, comic images are (often) presented in tiny formats, and do not command attention because of their multiplicity (Lawson 255 c.f. in Beaty 19–20).

Scott McCloud noted in 1993 that comics suffer from low self-esteem (McCloud 18). According to Van Lente and Dunlavey, the comics industry has stigmatized itself as mere “kiddie fare” for decades (92). Nevertheless, according to Geraghty, toy companies are keen to cash in on this rejuvenilization of media fan culture by embracing the playful adult consumer (*Reconstructing Childhood Memories*).

The historical development of toys and comics is similarities beyond the obvious, and somewhat misleading, notion that both

belong exclusively to children's culture and lowbrow art, a misconception that is more persistent with toys. In the age of the *ludic turn*, discussed by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), and an era in time, in which play is gaining more paidic features associated with open-ended and creative directions in the first decennia of the 21st century, adults are showing increased interest in the toyish and playful products and of popular culture that no longer belong solely to the infantile, but rather, potential players of all ages (Heljakka *Principles of adult play (fulness)*). Consequently, toys are increasingly identified as objects of adult fandom (Geraghty *Cult collectors*).

Similarly, in recent times, comics have increasingly become acknowledged as a transgenerational genre of sequential art. The "not just for kids anymore" rhetoric in relation to comics culture, is addressed in the ensuing discussion of 'kidults' (adult consumers and players) in contemporary toy cultures.³

Transmedia play: Toying with openness vs. closure in playthings and comics

Artists such as Lynda Barry and Scott McCloud have pondered the nature of play. Barry asks, "What is playing?," and states: "At the center of everything we call 'the arts,' and children call 'play,' is something which seems somehow alive" (11). For Barry, playing is inherently about not knowing. In other words, playing presents an activity where one is predisposed to expect the unexpected. She contends, play is "one of the oldest, most complex, and most tightly integrated of all ecosystems" (11), which should not only be viewed as fun. Adults often combine playing and entertainment, fun or happiness. However, as Barry explains, there can be a kind of amnesia about the seriousness of playing (51). Indeed, engaging in fantasy play is often connected solely to childhood. Familiar texts from childhood, such as character toys and comics, are recycled, re-imagined and re-appropriated by adults as they rediscover their favorite cartoons, series, and films (Geraghty *Back to that special time*). However, adults' urge to play cannot only be attributed to nostalgia for their past or a form of regression, but also with a curiosity and progressive enthusiasm to discover what playing offers adults in the present.

McCloud considers play as a lifelong project, as a matter of fact, a lifestyle. He contends, “Kids don’t have a *monopoly* on the ability to play. This phenomenon is as much about *attitude* as about *age*” (McCloud 145). Thus, playfulness is more of an *attitude*, whereas playing relates to an *activity* (Ibid.). It is not only about play being interactive, but the tendency of toys and comics to function as springboards for imaginative minds across generations. The playfulness of seriality and images, in one way, comes across in the use of imagination in the reading, mental manipulation, and interpretation of the stories. In practice, this refers to a reader’s potential to put their imagination in play when interpreting what is depicted and written in the panels, and also what is left unwritten in the in-between space of the gutter.

The playability of toys and comics

“What is an image? It’s the pull-toy that pulls you, takes you from one place to another,” (Barry 122). Through playing, we may bring something to life. The object of playing, then, should first and foremost, be *playable*. The *extrinsic* play value of a toy can be understood in terms of its playability. The *intrinsic* play value again refers to how the toy can be played with.

Danziger-Russell compares comics with picture books by arguing that when reading comics, one must negotiate between what is shown in images and what is expressed textually. Additionally, one has to “grapple with the concept of time and movement represented in the visual narrative” (Danziger-Russell 39). These qualities are often accentuated when discussing imaginative play of the mind.

“Do images have motion?,” Barry asks (83). Each panel of a comic shows a single moment in time, and *between* those frozen moments (between the panels) our minds fill in the *intervening moments*, creating the illusion of *time and motion*. (McCloud 94). In comics, the writer and/or artist must decide which images (pictures and words) to show in order to tell the story. “The process of encapsulation involves selecting certain moments of prime action from the imagined story and encapsulating, or enclosing, renderings of those moments in a discrete space [“panel”]” (Duncan and Smith 131). As Danziger-Russell points out, reading is equally important in the case of wordless

narratives, as images in themselves, must be read (59). The comics have a close relationship to closure, as McCloud writes:

Comic panels *fracture* both *time* and *space*, offering a *jagged, staccato rhythm* of *unconnected moments*. But closure allows us to *connect* these moments and *mentally construct* a *continuous, unified reality*. If *visual iconography* is the *vocabulary* of comics, *closure* is its *grammar* and since our *definition* of comics hinges on the *arrangement* of elements – then in a very real sense, *comics is closure*.

(McCloud 67)

In *Mythologies*, Barthes famously ponders the potential openness of toys in relation to detailed toys, and states that “the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy” (Barthes). Character toys such as dolls, soft toys, and action figures often based on other popular culture phenomena, are simultaneously both playfully open and closed entities. The *playfully closed object* resists creative play, but promotes transmedia consumption by being mediatically open (Steinberg 113–114). According to Dan Fleming, toys keep narratives open, refusing closure (102). In this way, toys have function differently in regard to openness versus closure. As illustrated by the hybrid quality of Chris Ware’s, book-in-a-box, *Building Stories* (2012), closure in comics can be challenged by altering the presentation of traditional comics by developing them like a three-dimensional board game.

Question of play-value and new rules of play

Contemporary artist, Gary Panter, has said, “I make the rules of the game that becomes my art” (in Beaty orig. in Nadal). The question of rules becomes more intriguing when considering cultural products designed and created for the purpose of playing. Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and a very linear progression, “Just a straight line from point A to point B,” writes McCloud (106). This rule can either be followed, or challenged. In games rules establish novel frameworks for action and agency (Flanagan 206). In some sense, she writes, “all games are performative, requiring some

negotiation of action—thinking, guessing, running, or tossing—for play” (149).

As Flanagan further notes, play implies action (115). Manifold dimensions of storytelling are not entirely tied to the physical and three-dimensional dimensions: The “reading” of toys happens through both physical and mental manipulation. But the “rules” of the engagement with playthings through the use of imagination are limitless. As McCloud describes, as popular characters both in comics and action toys, superheroes are “*first and foremost about role-playing – becoming the character*” (118). Previously, most of the local toy industry was selling props for role-playing in order for the player to pretend to be a character. Interestingly, as Steinberg points out, during the 1960s, in Japan, children went from *being* or *playing* the character to *playing with* the character toy. “The new mass media toy was the character in its entirety,” a 3D version of it (Steinberg 109). According to Kumagi, a mass-media toy relies on its extrinsic interest or on the appeal of the character. In the 21st century, toy-play is simultaneously about *playing with* the character, as well as *identifying with* the character (see e.g. Heljakka *Aren't you a doll!*). In this way, the “thingness” of the toy is a multifaceted “matter” of play.

The nature of contemporary toy play is not only present in play patterns regarding the material dimensions of play, but also in its increasingly *hybrid* and *social* nature (Heljakka *Strategies of social screen-play(ers)*). Furthermore, it has an increasingly transmedia quality. Therefore, contemporary play may also be understood as transmedia play. *Transmedia play* refers to a new way of understanding how new media literacies are developed through interactions with contemporary media that link stories and structures across platforms. Transmedia play is characterized by *resourcefulness*, *sociality*, *mobility*, *accessibility*, and *replayability* (Alper and Herr-Stephenson). Next, the media-relations of comics and toys are analyzed in conjunction with the concept of transmedia play.

Transmediality: The crossing paths of the play media of toys and comics

“Play is grounded in the concept of possibility” (Csikszentimihalyi and Bennett). The comic artist is interested in delivering a story-

world with identifiable characters to a reader by engaging the reader to participate in the process of interpretation, both imaginatively and emotionally. A toy designer strives to activate the player to engage with the object and to give such affordances to the plaything, which may be unlocked in play. In other words, a toy designer's task is to guide the player in actualizing the potential playability of the toy. Both readers of comics and players of toys must be *resourceful*, the first criteria for transmedia play in terms of the imaginative capabilities.

Physical toys are becoming increasingly mobile, and traditional comics have always been portable. In the age of digitalization, the latter may also be accessed on mobile devices. Therefore, both media fulfil another criteria for transmedia play, *mobility*.

Sometimes playing connects with everything we do, and sometimes, as a pattern of behaviour, is evoked by a playful object. Whereas both toys and comics may be engaged in solitary ways, it is the *sociality* of interpersonal communication that happens around this activity that often satisfies both readers and players the most. In other words, the social sharing of the meanings associated with both comics and toy characters, and their story-worlds, is relevant.

Until the age of the Internet, print media were the main platforms for launching comics. In 2000, Scott McCloud wrote about the benefits of print, which has "a loyal following," in addition to being cheap and "fast." "Once you open the page, the words and images are *already there*, and you can *flip through* them at any speed you choose." He then compared print media to desktop screens, asserting that ink on paper offers higher resolution than screens and that as print is cross-platform, neither special hardware nor software is required. Furthermore, he wrote that print is more portable and easier to use than computers. There is no *learning curve* with paper and ink. Even the smallest *children* can do it. (McCloud 2000, 175). In the 2020s, the two last aspects of print media do not necessarily hold as much benefit over digital technologies, as mobile devices have become more portable and easier to use, even for young children. In this way, both comics and toys fulfil the next criterion for transmedia play, *accessibility*.

Finally, transmedia play is characterized by *replayability*, which refers to a long-term and multifaceted affordance for using the media product. Replayability, thus, relates directly to use value of the comic or toy, a key dimension of functionality and what Geraghty considers

as the the longevity of the toy (*Reconstructing Childhood Memories*). Compared to the serial, and therefore, constantly renewed and replaceable comic, toys offer an open-ended playground with different possibilities for physical and imaginative manipulation. Hence, good comics and toys are replayable, and as such, feed the imagination multiple times. In character toys, even more than in comics, interest must be maintained through intriguing toy personalities, as well as creatively designed physical forms that allow players many ways of manipulating them over the long-term.

Conclusions: Toyification of comics culture—or the other way around?

In this theoretical essay, I have explored the similar and intersecting developments of the two-dimensional, juxtaposed and serial image (comics), three-dimensional, material objects (toys), and the nature of interplay that happens between these interwoven, visual, material, and fictional universes.

Significantly, comics and toys share many qualities, and in fact, have an intertwining relationship. Moreover, toys and comics are inherently playful in nature, or rather, invite their users to become players and readers who fantasize about the characters and story worlds in which they exist. Although their physical manipulation appears quite different, that both trigger the imagination is unquestionable. Because comics have matured as an artistic and popular form of storytelling, it is no wonder that people are “toying” with their seemingly unlimited possibilities. The the ludic turn (Sutton-Smith), which is experiencing an increase of adult players, or *kidults*, seems particularly welcoming to these experiments, demonstrating increasingly paidic—or childlike, open-ended, and creative forms of play (Heljakka *From Playborers and Kidults to Toy Players*). Consequently, toys and comics are no longer exclusive to children, and instead, attract far wider demographics.

With the notable rise of “kidults,” the developing digital technology, the desire to play socially, and finally, to interact creatively with comics and toys, it is possible to foresee potential future developments of many more forms of serial storytelling. That is to say, both

comics and toys, as well as their players and readers, are undergoing transformations.

For example, comics are no longer stigmatized as the “bastards of the art world,” and adult fans of toys are no longer infantilized or labeled as having Peter Pan syndrome. Interestingly, the increasing acknowledgment of comics as a medium for varying demographics seems to have helped toys achieve a more perceivable presence for mature audiences in the art world. For instance, comic artists often express an interest in toys as collectors, players, or “toying artists” (see Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*). Toys, thus, influence comic arts and vice versa, and the relations between these realms of popular culture are multifaceted and often tied to global entertainment culture either in marginalized cultural forms, or critical approaches to them.

Possibilities afforded by emerging digital, mobile, and augmented technologies offer a sumptuous playground for experimentation with hybrids of toys and comics. Moreover, the prediction is that the supersystem of play (Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*) will include more thematic hybridity between comics and toys, and more mash-ups of popular culture characters, as story-worlds become more complex, due to not only their intertextuality, but also because of their manifold material dimensions. One way of approaching toys and comics that have originally presented themselves as material media is to investigate their relations to: 1) physical materiality; 2) emerging transmedia connections; and, 3) their relationship to transmedia play. This essay has attempted to advance the scholarship by discussing these three perspectives together. I have discussed the materiality of both toys and comics by analyzing their various aspects, presented examples of their transmedia relationship, and highlighted play as a form of creatively consuming these media.

Indeed, there may be more hybridity of the story-worlds of toys and comics in the future. This is not limited to the physical materiality of the two mediums, nor their physical mechanics in terms of their functions. Perhaps, we will see how the worlds of characters will mash and mix-up in increasing numbers. Simultaneously, their mutual relations will become even more layered, blended, and complex.

It is already possible to see the “cutified” figures of the Funko Pop! vinyl toy series based on known popular cultural icons (even

characters that originated in comics) turned from toys into two-dimensional characters of a traditional comic. One example is the 2021 Funko Pop! Vinyl Comic Cover toys featuring a DC Superman Action Comic. The prediction is that we are going to witness more hybridization—in fact, a reversed toyification and thingification or, rather, an increasing *comicfication* (see Table 2.) in which toys become the content of serial visual narratives with a toyish twist.

Notes

This study was funded by the Academy of Finland research project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (decision #312396). The author is indebted to artists, Matti Hagelberg and Katja Tukiainen, for the professional insights and valuable comments they shared throughout their course ‘Sarjakuvailmaisu I–III’ [Comics Expression] during 2013–2015.

1. *Toyification* communicates the idea of an entity (either physical, digital or hybrid) being intentionally reinforced with ‘toyish’ elements or dimensions; an object, a structure, an application, a character or a technology acquiring a toyish appearance, form or function (see e.g., Thibault and Heljakka)
2. As Jonathan Gray claims, toys are often considered *paratexts*.
3. Two of the author’s earlier publications (Heljakka *Principles of adult play(fulness)*) and Heljakka, *Strategies of social screen-play(ers)*) lay a foundation for seeing the adult consumer as a buyer and user of toys—for their own leisure-time enjoyment—in other words, for the purposes of playing with the toys. Since these earlier phases of research, the ‘kidult’ trend has grown into a notable megatrend, even accentuated in toy industry-related events, most recently at the Nuremberg International Toy Fair of February 2019, where this consumer group for toys was highlighted to have significant buying potential. Also see: See “Kidult World” – Highlight in Hong Kong” and Heljakka (*From Playborers and Kidults to Toy Play-ers*).

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