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In the Toy Story 2 film, the character of Buzz Lightyear says dewily, “Life is only worth living if you have been loved by a kid”. Of course, Buzz himself, who is a toy astronaut, is used to surrendering to manipulation of a playing child. A toy then, according to the philosophy of Buzz Lightyear, one of the central characters in the Toy Story film trilogy, is practically useless if not given a life inside the magic circle of children’s play.

Toys and games of all kinds have intrigued the playing human – homo ludens – for a long time. Toys are also, as anthropologist and toy researcher Minna Ruckenstein notes, a child’s first possession. In the western world, the things for play come to have an effect on how we gain experiences of the visual, material and the narrative dimensions of our surroundings from the early days of our human lives.

Moreover, the emergence of play in society today is undisputable. In the time of the ludic turn, as discussed by recognized play and toy researcher Brian Sutton-Smith, playing has elevated its status as a category of human behaviour. Play in adulthood is a phenomenon that is gaining interest in the academic context, especially in areas such as game studies and creative business management. Whereas toy play, according to many sources, terminates not later than by the age of 14, gamers seem to become ageless. For example, board games are often tied with the idea of transgenerational entertainment. On the other hand, the age of the average player of digital games is now well over 30 years. Today, adult

enthusiasm towards games and digital games especially, does not carry the same stigma of oddness as a similar interest in toys.

Toys are, indeed, intriguing objects that have fascinated me from the early days of my childhood. What brought me back to this playful world in adulthood and raised an intensified interest towards the things for play, was my first profession, the one of a game designer. After having worked in the toy industry for over a decade as a designer of board games, my interest slowly turned from games towards toys – and in Caillois' terms from ludus to paidea.

Games as regulated systems of play require the existence of rules. My choice to turn to research on toys instead of games followed the idea that I had of toys that are completely freed of the burden of prescribed rules. The openness further directed me towards an object of study that has been widely neglected in earlier research on toys. I became involved in studying adult interaction with toys and consequently came in contact with the cultures of contemporary toys.

Adults' relations to toys

The primary task in my study was to find out how adults use toys. The first challenge in studying adults' relations to toys quickly dawned on me: The questions in reference to adulthood are indeed charged, when considering interaction with toys. There is clearly a fear of strangeness that is connected with the concept of the toy playing adult.

A prolonged childhood as an explanation to adult interest in toys and playful behaviour on a more general level, the criticized 'kidults' and 'Peter Pans' of our contemporary world and ASYL, meaning Adults Staying Younger Longer as a counter trend to KGOY, Kids Growing Older Younger, seem to attempt to twist and turn the discussion on toy play to various – and often concerned directions. Sometimes toys are discussed from the viewpoint of being a symptom of the infantilized adult.

The supposed infantilization of culture is according to many a dangerous condition of contemporary society that ultimately leads to 'children that have children of their own'. In many cases, the infantilized adult, most often described as male, surrounded by his toys and never-ending entertainment, poses a threat to the civilized society. Walt Disney once asked, "Why must we grow up?" What he must have sought to capture all his life, I believe, was the chance to free the imaginations of potential players of all ages instead of granting them an everlasting childhood.

Toys are the tools for play, says anthropologist and toy researcher Jean-Pierre Rossie. To indicate that a toy is an object, an instrument to be used in play, is to recognize the existence of the playing subject – an animal or a human-being, regardless of his or her age. When evaluating the *raison d'être* for toys, one cannot separate the play aspect of the thing, its role as a trigger of playful behaviour. Thus, when orienting with the earlier research on play and the cultural history related to toys, it became clear for me that adult activities with toys could be viewed as and defined as play. In fact, studying toy play at different periods of human life makes it clear to see how unnecessary the division of seeing the child as the 'becoming' and the adult has the 'being', as pointed out by Nick Lee, really is. In my thinking, we are all 'becomings', constantly transformed in our thinking and by our actions in the world.

Ephemeral and emerging play

In his recent dissertation on pervasive games, Markus Montola writes: "All play is ephemeral. [...] Play is transient and vanishing; after play concludes, it is impossible to access it, except through witness reports, photographs and artefacts produced and used in play."

The very visual and in many cases static quality of the toy, often makes it an easier object of study than play. While toys are an indispensable part of our material reality, to prove the existence of the play acts that happen with them on the other hand, requires persistent attention from the researcher.

As a designer, I became interested in how toys are given their playful potential when being designed. As a toy enthusiast, I believed to have certain assumptions on what makes a toy an interesting object. As a researcher I knew that these assumptions needed to be tested rigorously.

There is not much earlier research on toy play, although the cultural history of playthings is well-documented for example from the antiquarian viewpoint. Putting manufacturing, aesthetics and raw materials aside, I allowed the player perspective to take centre stage in my study. I focused primarily on studying the toy as an instrument of play with a special interest in the motivations of the toy playing adult forming relationships with the plaything. My study concentrated on three categories of toys with a face; dolls, action figures and soft toys (character toys) and the play that happens with them.

The many playgrounds that adult activities with toys take place in are various places and spaces, yet they may not be perceivable to us in our immediate

environments, unless we are toy players ourselves. As the study at hand seeks to formulate an understanding toy play at adult age, the academic realm of visual culture provided a particularly useful launching pad: The tracing of adult toy users and their play activities begun by exploring toy-related images exhibited on photo management application Flickr. A close reading of toy photography, which I in my thesis refer to as photoplay helped me to form an understanding of what kind of play acts have lead to the creation of these visual representations. In many cases the photographs studied revealed adult involvement.

By combining thematic interviews conducted with toy designers, artists and toy hobbyists with auto-ethnographic toy play activities of my own (autoplay) and a content analysis of photoplay as shared on social media, I was able to gain an understanding of the kinds of play acts that had been carried out with these playthings. Both documenting and auto-playing with toys became necessary methodological choices in my study: Apart of being a toy researcher, I became a toy collector, toy displayer and toy photographer – a toy playing adult.

Defining the toy experience

The affordances of contemporary toys became an avenue for me to explore the value of toys as artefacts that encapsulate playful potentiality when considering their possible transgenerational audiences. This theoretical concept paved the way for my understanding of mass-produced toys as designed objects that can never really be described as completely open-ended artefacts. They both enable and constrain play. For behind them underlie the creative and playful ideas, attitudes and actions of toy designers, the primary makers and players of contemporary toy cultures who have their say in what it is that creates play value.

In the second formulation of my research question, I asked what (toy) designers may learn from a study interested in adult interaction with toys. This is a relevant question, since not all designers, toy companies or toy design educations see adults as potential toy players. The role of toy designers is then to amplify the potentiality of the toy by taking its affordances to what I have in the thesis named WOW. In my study I have found that the best toys trigger the experience of WOW, they create – when played with – a FLOW and last, when being transformed in terms of storyness, materiality and value, attain an auratic GLOW. Back stories, the meanings of the face, the form, the name and the narrative dimension of the toy are discussed as elements of wowness that are of potential interest to the adult. It seems that in toy cultures more really is more: DIY

activities in relation to mass-produced toys, photoplay and toy tourism with its travelling toys exemplify novel dimensions of play with contemporary toys.

Play activities that generate the feeling of flow for adults simultaneously add value to the object. Creative, productive behaviour such as dis-playing, making clothes, accessorizing, and styling the toy characters exemplify what adults do to cultivate their beloved toy companions. Further, these artefacts come to mirror us. Thus, in the light of my research, toys are tools for creativity, but also partners, co-agents, even our avatars and in this sense, further tools for identity work in cases where the capacity of the toy extends its avatarial dimension and the toy becomes a mini-me. In the end of their lifecycles then, in some cases, the most treasured toys cast an afterglow comparable to other valuable artefacts in material, visual and popular cultures, even art.

Social media plays an important part in showcasing toy play activities. It is precisely in these realms that adult relationships with toys come to demonstrate a shift in toy cultures from the traditional activity of caring to the social ways of sharing and enjoying the toy experiences of like-minded aficionados in toy cultures both online and offline.

Convergence of toys and games

Even though play theories often dismiss adults as toy players, grown-ups are now coming out of their toy closets. Through this study, and my attempt to make a “Zeitdiagnose” of adult play(fulness) in contemporary toy cultures, I wish to have been able to give a voice to the adult toy players of this world – the toy collectors, the toying artists, the designers at play and the creative and productive ‘everyday’ dis-players – to recognize them and their rich and multidimensional toy experiences.

As demonstrated in my thesis, it becomes clear that today toys should be treated as objects that are acquired, cherished and played with by people of all ages. Toys are the instruments of play that as the potential things for play come to have significance in triggering the play instinct of the adult by luring him or her to actualize their play potential and by doing so, ultimately, test their play value. A well-designed toy captures the idea of cultivation and craftsmanship that when played with increases the visual, material and narrative value and therefore its auratic glow.

Toys. If these pieces of plastic may become sustained objects at adult age, maybe designers should pay even more attention to how to design such affordances into

toys that cater for the prolonged needs of adults to be wowed and brought into play, into a pleasant state of flow. Furthermore, as an additional finding of the study, I discovered that the play patterns related to contemporary toy cultures do not necessarily differ significantly from the cultures of gaming, although they are first and foremost believed to belong to the magic circle of open-ended play. Structured forms of behaviour i.e. paralleling ruled-based game play, can occur in toy play as well. Rules are created by the toy players themselves as playing with the plaything evolves.

Hybridity between the material and the digital play material as well as the current converging of toy and game play, present topics of research that will continue to intrigue both industry parties and the researchers of digital and material playthings for years to come. Clearly, there are interesting developments going on in the intersecting cultures and industries of play. These developments offer endless possibilities for a toy researcher to continue studying what has been initiated in my research.

As a closing remark, based on the findings of my study, I would like to suggest that in order to give toys a rightful treatment both in the realm of future academic research and in the broad spheres of play cultures, toys should be treated as a more recognized and respected area of study. Furthermore, I think, Buzz Lightyear's thought should be revised. Because the lives and lifecycles of toys, and the lifecycles of toy characters in particular, become worthy not only when being 'loved by a kid', but when being appreciated, cherished and creatively cultivated – in other words played with – rather, by anyone, including the matured.