Traditional Toys in the Age of Digital Technology: Applying Symbolic Interactionism to Children at Play

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Abstract

Traditional toys and digital playthings are blending more seamlessly within the modern childhood experience. Families with children are increasingly exposed to technology while some either prefer or are unable to access basic technological devices. Educationalists and parents alike understand the importance of exposing children early to a mixture of educational values through playing with toys and if possible, carefully with technology. Through case study, the article includes a symbolic interpretation by observation and interviewing children in the nursery. The purpose of investigation: exploring whether children exposed with digital technology causes them to be less original in their imagination and creativity during time in the nursery.

Children’s Games (Bruegel 1560)

Introduction

The picture above represents the historic importance and seriousness of playtime. The Flemish painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, painted “Children’s Games” in 1560, depicting the physically energetic and imaginative engagement of girls and boys during the 16th-century. Upon closer examination, the painting itself provides nearly 200 peasant children engaged in nearly 80 different games and play activities over a period of time. Bruegel’s work isn’t simply an encyclopedia of children’s games (a window into the amusements and recreations of the past), but illustrates from the adult perspective the importance and seriousness children place in creative and imaginative activities.

Bruegel recognized the importance of childhood imagination through open-ended and unadulterated creative freedoms. Scholars and educationalist have deliberately argued the importance of childhood imagination and
creativity through play. However, with the progressive changes in capitalism, companies have reformulated the childhood experience. Specifically, throughout each period, the childhood experience has altered it appearance with technology. Currently, children often spend less time working up nature, through discovery and exploration, given the design of popular toys which provide families with personal, inclusive [toy] entertainment. Although traditional toys, today, can be played with outside, the design of toys is commonly structured around indoor play with digital technology. Before industrialism, children often spent their days outside, unbothered by total parental supervision, leaving them exposed without much filtration, to the world. Today, children spend less time outside with traditional toy and more with digital media inside. For instance, in 2008, American children, eight-to eighteen-year-old reported more than six hours of daily media use in households (Donald F., and Ulla G.). That’s more time spent on a single activity other than sleep!

**Literature Review**

Currently, technology is ingrained within the lives of many children. Reportedly in 2011 half of children, in the United States, as old as 8-years gained access to mobile devices, like Smartphones, iPods, or an iPad or other tablets (Goldstein, 2013). Further in 2013 the American Academy of Pediatrics, mentioned the average 8- to 10-year-old spends nearly 8 hours a day with a variety of different media, and older children and teenagers spend 11-hours per day with media (Strasburger and Hogan). Experts and educationalist suggest there are growing “digital divides” in terms of access to technological resources with children. Those differences are associated with income and education which greatly factor into childhood experience. These factors are suspected of contributing towards that child’s motivations for fully utilizing technology imaginatively and creatively. Although traditional toys and digital playthings can provide similar learning experiences, it’s important to understand neither of these should be considered “luxury” commodities. Low-tech as well as high-tech are essential cultural integrators. As digital technology becomes central to society, it can no longer be considered luxury goods because of its importance in daily life (Hargittai. 2011).

These sweeping changes reinforce the importance of toys in society. Toys are not only precursor to familiarizing children with their future environment, but indicate that playful interaction with objects is necessary for social and cultural solidarity (Goldstein, 1994). Given the considerable integration of technology in society, researcher have consistently explored whether children, who play with electronic toys, play less creatively or imaginatively than children who play with more traditional toys (Bergen 2004, Plowman et al. 2010). Although these studies don’t provide significant clairvoyance on the subject, other studies examined whether media inhibits children’s imagination, determining if there is less originality and more imitation during fantasies ((Götz et al. 2005). Furthermore, critics and educationalist argue that children are no longer able to engage in authentic, spontaneous play, that the narratives, symbols, and scenarios of their pretend play have been taken over by the media, depriving children of the opportunity to develop their imagination and autonomy (Levin and Rosenquest 2001, Marsh 2002).

**Traditional Toys and Digital Technology**

This section includes the conceptualization of traditional toys and digital technology. While technology is advancing with capitalism, toys themselves take on new roles in which children foster cultural and social relevance. It’s important to understand technology is impregnated within the paradigm of social relevance. This means children are growing
up with technology earlier and younger and their creativity and imagination are wrapped up within digital culture. With those changes, there are growing ambiguities to the definition of toys given the rise of modern technology.

According to Dr. Michael Cohen, a developmental psychologist and the President of the Michael Cohen Group LLC (MCG), “It is a question of function rather than structure.” For instance, a phone is structured (designed) specifically to communicate with others, but Smartphones have many functions (i.e. internet, games, apps, etc). Under these circumstances how something is used identifies it or determines whether it is a toy. Furthermore, Dr. Cohen exclaims, toys are “traditionally a miniature version of something in the adult world that children use to play with.” Essentially, then, toys are anything analog without electronics that has been designed for children. On this view, construction sets, stuffed animals, plastic dolls and action figures are traditional toys.

On the other hand, digital technology isn’t as simple because it depends wholly on the design and purpose of the device. Children are exposed to media through digital technology. In modern society, digital media is increasingly part of the childhood experience and must be included in digital technology. I use the term digital playthings/digital technology because it best describes the electronic devices utilized both in the adult and childhood daily life. For instance, children in the United States have increasing access to internet, video games, television programs, computers, and various other electronic devices. Using this distinction, I will refer to “traditional toys” and “digital technology” when analyzing the case study.

Methodology

This study is designed to investigate the differences between traditional toys and digital playthings on a child’s creativity and imagination. Using symbolic interactionism (an exploration method of inspection), it is possible to understand the creative and imaginative meanings children engender from current digital technology and traditional toys. The relevance of symbolic interactionism allows investigators to analyze the meanings children gather through social interaction and interpretation of objects, events, and behaviors. This concept is borrowed from Herbert Blumer (1969), who studied under George Herbert Mead (the grandfather of symbolic sociology).

In Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method, Blumer discusses three basic principles. Firstly, he mentions human beings (conscious and aware) act towards things on the bases of their meaning. In this case, children draw meanings from traditional toys and digital technology through playfulness. Secondly, the meaning of things arises out of social interaction with others and things. Children, like adults, make different meanings while interacting with others, traditional toys, and digital technology. Lastly, the meaning of things are handled and modified through an interpretive process. Essentially, children take it upon themselves to interpret the moment through self thoughts of dialogue.

In accordance with Blumer’s principles, investigators gathered data through participant observation, qualitative interviews, and context of sources. In order to collect data, investigators documented all events where children either interacted and/or mentioned exposures with traditional toys and digital technology while in the nursery. Investigators documented the frequency children mentioned digital technology and traditional toys and meanings children interpreted during playtime with traditional toys and digital technology. Furthermore, Investigators gauged the imagination and creativity of children while in the nursery by interacting and observing their behaviors. This included arts and crafts both
unstructured and structured within the confines of the environment.

**Case Study: Nursery**

Main investigation started mid-February 2013 at the Church of the Brethren in Modesto, California. Each session was documented with note cards, scratch paper, and photography with children in the nursery while shadowing the nursery-head (NH) or voluntarily substituting during the NHs absence. Each session held place on Sundays between 9:45am until 12:15pm. During specific holiday weekends (i.e. Easter, Halloween, etc) children still attended normal nursery times. The average attendance age of children ranged between three and eight years of age with 2 to 3 children attending on any given Sunday. Children were allowed open-ended play with few restrictions on the types of activities. However, the church promoted non-violence and peaceful resolutions, meaning children or adults weren’t allowed to bring in suggestive materials while in the nursery. The children often held the opportunity to play outside with prenatal/adult supervision so long as it remained recreational under the standard guidelines of the church. Lastly, the nursery itself consisted of various toys engendered towards early child development ages 2-6: soft and hard blocks, dolls, playhouse (kitchen props, a shopping kart), children’s books, infant toys, coloring tools (crayons, markers, chalk, etc.). The church did not provide children with digital technology while in the nursery.

Participant Observations—Investigators used face-to-face interaction with children while in the nursery. The variables used in gathering data were conversations and interactions with children. In the mornings, investigators usually arrived at church at 9:15am to prepare and arrange the nursery promptly. The children participated in Sunday school until 10:00am, giving the NH sufficient time for preparations. Once the children arrived, they were allowed free-range activities within confinement of the nursery. Children were often timid while in the presence of their parents before fully submersing themselves in playful activates. Once parents gave their children permission to play, children became more spirited, interacting with the NH and other children in clamorous and vivacious ways.

The children often discussed popular digital games while in nursery. On most occasions, children discussed their experiences with the popular game Minecraft, a 2009 sandbox construction video game where users virtually explore randomly generated worlds. Children shared their Minecraft experiences considerably with others familiar with the game. One participant consistently mentioned the character “Herobrine” in their Minecraft game. This character has been regarded as fictitious in Minecraft, meaning there’s no possible way Herobrine can exist in any unmodded client or server within the game (minecraftwiki). Although participant “A” elaborated on his Herobrine experiences, other children in the group denounced the likelihood of Herobrines’ appearance (Figure 1). Through recognizing the social meaning of Herobrine, participant “A” tried elevating he’s popularity within the group by inferring he witnessed the character. Although this competitive pattern for attention with digital technology varied between children,
investigators gained a sense for how children were exposed to media or digital playthings through socialization.

Qualitative Interviewing—investigators asked children open-ended questions in regards with their experiences with toys and technology. Not all participants responded to each question given their absence or inability to understand the prompt. Firstly, children (ages 3-8) were asked their favorite toys. Investigators received various responses including: Barbie, Monster High, My Little Pony, Dora the Explorer, Thomas the Tank, Minecraft Creeper, Dolly, and LEGOs. Although their toys fell under the definition of traditional toy, children favored toys that were referenced from media or digital technology, meaning children were formally or informally exposed to T.V. shows and video games. Children were modifying the meaning of “favorite toy” through “interpretive process” and associating it with popular digital media (Blumer). Furthermore, studies have suggested children develop differently with content in media (i.e. watching television or playing video games). For instance, children exposed to “Dora the Explorer” are associated with increased vocabulary and expressive language skills while children exposed to “Teletubbies” are associated with decreases in both measures (Linebarger and Walker, 2005). Essentially, the meanings from media (shows) or digital technology (video games) are carried through traditional toys which children engender through play.

Secondly, interviews were followed up with asking children about their favorite activity at home. Children answered mainly with “watching television”, “playing games on their tablet”, and “apps on the internet” while traditional toys and outside activates were hardly mentioned. One child mentioned their favorite activity as “being outside and riding [their] my scooter”. This child was part of Family Promise, a low-income and homeless outreach program supported by the church. Although children had mentioned their favorite traditional toys, children reported considerably more involvement with digital technology. Finally, investigators questioned children about their personal utilization and intentions with technology. Children older than three, who favored media and technology, understood how to download applications, access files and programs, and used the internet for recreational activities. One participant (age-4) explained when they’re bored at home they’ll lay in bed with their “parents tablet and watch Netflix”.

During another interview, a participant (age 4) brought their iPad (a touch screen device) into the nursery to display their understanding of digital technology. As the child navigated the main screen, accessing an application file, she begin to play Subway Surfers, an “endless running” mobile game released in spring 2012. During the course of the demonstration, the noise of the room softened substantially, until most of the children huddled around the participant and her iPad with silent astonishment. Suddenly, children in the nursery were cheering and providing advice while playing the game.

Figure 1. Children in the first image are playing with nursery blocks (constructing a puppet show) while children in the second image are playing with LEGOs while discussing Minecraft.
Although children played together with traditional toys (i.e. blocks, LEGOs, dolls), at no other point while in the nursery had traditional toys provided children with similar awestruck amazement. Eventually, children were taking-turns playing with the iPad. The meaning of the situation had changed through the social interaction (Blumer). Children recognized the excitement of the iPad in the nursery, given its unusual place were digital technology wasn’t typically accessible.

Context—anything written, visual, or spoken was analyzed by investigators. Occasionally, children requested either the NH or investigators to read books from the nursery library, a small shelf consisting of nursery rhymes, fantasy, intro biblical [basic bible stories], and folktale novels. These events were insufficiently measured given their spontaneous and infrequent nature. Either the investigators weren’t present during sessions, or the nursery head couldn’t document their findings. Furthermore, children moderately, participated in drawing sessions with NH and investigators. Participants were freely able draw either inside or outside on the patio sidewalk without restrictions on their imagination or creativity. Children often drew people, objects/things, and animals they were familiar with either formally or informally.

During one session, investigators asked children to design their own superhero characters in order to gauge their originality of imagination and creativity. Only one child (age 5) fully participated. Investigators told the participant to draw something “original”, explaining, “it could be anything [they] you imagine”. After a few second, she decided to draw a female superhero using yellow, red, and purple crayons (Figure 2). By thinking to herself, she handled the situation through interpretative process (Blumer). Once finished, she wrote “Super Girl” next to her drawing and held it up to explain, “This is Super Girl. She’s the cousin of Superman”.

Investigators often experienced that children used images from digital media while being creative and imaginative.

Figure 2a and 2b. In the upper frame we see a drawing of Super Girl by the 5-year old while in the lower frame we see a drawing of Herobrine (from Minecraft) by a 6-year old.

Furthermore, the toys children brought were typically part of series (i.e. Batman, Star Wars, Disney etc). The nursery head and investigators both noticed children brought in toys that held aggressive and suggestive meanings. For instance, one child brought in their LEGOs attached with weapons (i.e. guns, swords, bows, lasers, rockets, etc). Once children started playing with these toys, they mimicked the characteristics associated
with them in media. During one session, children divided the LEGO characters from “good” and “bad” while building prisons. One child began acting aggressively (verbally and physically) towards others while playing imaginatively with these toys. Essentially, the children were acting towards the toys on the basis of the meanings those toys had for them (Blumer). Although LEGOs are considered a traditional toy, their brand includes characters from environments in media. Essentially, the meanings of toys associated with media transferred the message to the child through play. Violence is one of the greater concern regarding influences of technology among educationalists and parents. According to Huesmann (2009), Pak (2009), and Comstock (1994), young children develop beliefs about social norms and acceptable behavior based on the content of their experiences. Activates associated with violence are suggestive proponents for social acceptance of normal aggressive behaviors.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study wouldn’t have been possible without the permission from the ministers and members of the church. This allowed investigators to approach their research through groundwork methods. Essentially, investigators used inductive approach and later build towards their theory. This applied greatly while working with children and parents in the nursery, which allowed investigators to explore and examine as much as possible. This study mainly used participants associated with the Church of the Brethren in Modesto. However, it didn’t ascertain the income and education of parents associated with the children in the nursery. In future studies, it would be beneficial to include a cross-comparison with children from different socioeconomic and geographic locations. If anything, this study provided basic groundwork in examining the effects of digital technology on children’s imagination and creativity.

Children were more likely to borrow or imitate characters from media instead of being original in their imagination and creativity. Most of the toys children brought in already held developed stories about the characters or environment. Although children were given unstructured play, their toys already held specific meanings, which the children often ended up playing out through structured roles. When children were playing with nursery toys without background information on the characters or environment, children often developed their own personal stories and narratives. This would suggest that creativity and imagination are influenced by the meanings associated to digital media through experiences with traditional toys.

By using Blumer theory of symbolic interactionism, investigators determined traditional toys were seemingly tied with digital technology while in the nursery. Although children acted towards traditional toys and digital technology on the base of their meanings, children’s imagination and creativity weren’t substantially obstructed by digital technology. Although children mentioned their favorite traditional toys, their toys were mainly associated with digital technology. Characters were derived from T.V. shows and video games, which suggests the children were exposed from an early age to digital media. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between age and time spent with digital technology and traditional toys. However, children reported that their favorite activity at home involved using digital technology rather than playing with their favorite toys.

Lastly, it would be premature to ignore possible influences that may have caused unusual behaviors in this case study. For instance, the presence of investigators in the nursery could have influenced the children to behave differently than they normally would behave. Children were timid of investigators at the beginning of the study. As investigators
continued to participate, children began showing more interest in spending time with the investigators while in the nursery. Furthermore, parents of the children associated in the study held the belief that children should have balanced interactions with digital technology and traditional toys because both provide different opportunities of play, which they perceive to be important to young children growing up in society. These parents are aware that media is highly invasive in their child’s experience, and most have developed procedures for reducing their children’s exposure to violent and suggestive digital media.

**Bibliography**


