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Toys, Games and Play in the Circle Dance of Children's Mass Culture
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> **"**Books, toys, television, and the computer are components of the symbolic literacy of the information society. One learns how to "read" objects (i.e. toys), read books, "read" television and "read" computers.**"** Brian Sutton-Smith *Toys as Culture* (1986) p. 78

Mass culture for the child market is varied and can be characterized by the large diversity of its merchandising through both material and visual media. In this heterogeneous and well-structured market are found:
- films and television series (essential media often the starting point, for both establishing a gage of notoriety and for diffusing content, themes and characters)
- toys
- video games
- board and card games
- images, stickers, tags/decals of all kinds
- books, albums, comic books or mangas
- web sites, online games
- miscellaneous products using images, stories or concepts derived from all this products (like food, clothing, etc.)

Themes, characters, worlds and narrative genres circulate from one medium to another, as if in a circuit. A common thread runs from game to film, from film to internet and so on. This "circular" [1] distribution network is a dominant characteristic of a mass culture that develops synergies between media in order to exist in all areas of a child's life. A state of saturation that is omnipresent.
The following examples will more clearly illustrate this circuit.

Pokémon or the Circle of the Pocket Monsters
Pokémon is the huge turn of the millennium success story. But where is the toy? Is it in the stuffed animal Pikachu, the group's emblematic character, or in the 151 pocket (action) figures, later increased to 300 in order to satisfy ever-growing public demand? These toys, though unparalleled best sellers, cannot alone account for the Pokémon phenomenon. Above all, it was the video game created for the pocket Game Boy console that met with unexpected success. The game soon became a television series, a film—followed by eight others—and a game of collectible cards sold worldwide. Other video games for the Nintendo Play Station home console were then added, not to mention board games, clothing, ANA's (the Japanese airline company's) "Pokémon Jet," food and so on. A never-ending expanding circle of products, each latching onto the international hit bandwagon until the day Pokémon lost its star status, becoming just another video game. [2]
A chronological analysis allows us to understand how this international phenomenon came to be. The video game, based upon the concept of the insect collection, was expanded upon during a six-year development phase, following a recipe that, according to Nintendo, would ensure success. It was Tajiri Satoshi, a freelancer under contract with Nintendo, who imagined the game for the Game Boy. The object of the game is to explore a world of imaginary creatures—the "Pokémon" or "pocket monsters"—and to collect them. There are several ways to play: exploring a virtual world in search of monsters, trading (creatures) with other players' Game Boys to complete the collection and competing in monster battles in which the Pokémon can advance to different levels.
The inventor did not create anything new; but by linking together several heterogeneous components, he came up with an original game. One such inspiration comes from Tajiri Satoshi's childhood, when as a young boy he used to hunt for insects, put them in boxes, collect and trade them. Pokémon is a virtual transposition of a childhood playing tradition, emphasizing exchange and communication in a hunt for treasure.

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[1] We refer to a "circular" distribution network or "circuit" in which information flows freely up and down the chain so that the end of the chain can end up influencing the beginning of the chain.

[2] J. Tobin (ed.) *Pikachu's Global Adventure – The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, Durham, Duke University Press & A. Allison, *Millennial Monsters – Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006

But the creator is also a child of his era, immersed in digital culture, and living in a virtual world that would become a justifiable environment for his Pokémon. At Nintendo's request, Satoshi also added competitive elements, the basis of video game culture for young boys representing the target audience. He probably knew the card game *Magic*, the object of which (collecting cards to use them in duels) seems structurally close to that of Pokémon. He was no doubt also influenced by the success of Tamagutchi, in which the player raises a virtual creature, similar to the idea of raising captured monsters.

Thus, at the genesis of the product is a series or circuit of recycled cultural elements derived from either the play culture of the era or the childhood memories of its inventors, including those created by children as much as those created for children.

But Pokémon did not remain a Game Boy cartridge for long. The success and enthusiasm met in Japan led to the launch of a television series and a card game. It became necessary to transpose the video game onto other media platforms (the Game Boy's graphics were limited), and to expand upon the existing Pokémon world as per the specifications for each medium. The television series allowed for developing a story, character illustrations, designing the main character (Pikachu) and for expanding the target market to include younger children and girls above and beyond the 8-12 year old boy niche. With the introduction of tangible play material— "real" toys and cards—children were able to play Pokémon in a social setting—during school recess for example—as well as in a virtual context. The cards lifted the game out of its virtual world and into a child's everyday social environment.[3]

In order to understand what lies behind Pokémon, we need to explore beyond the original medium. The Game Boy video game is not Pokémon, despite the fact that therein lies its origin and defines some of its characteristics. The construction of significations particular to this virtual world goes beyond this first step, and is based upon a three point strategy: 1. a video game, 2. a television series and 3. a card game. What muddles our idea of Pokémon is that this three point strategy accelerates the sizeable distribution network. Films incorporating refined storytelling techniques represent its success (at the box office), as do traditional play material (figures, stuffed toys), board games, other video games and an entire collection of products for children bringing Pokémon images and values into a child's life: clothing, stationery, food, etc.

Most media platforms only reproduce—as best as character integrity can be maintained when mass produced—what was developed under this three point strategy, except that the character exists outside the video game, the cards or the television show. The child is immersed in a fictional world that surrounds and constantly reminds him or her of this permanent state of saturation. The Pokémon world, like others in mass culture for children, becomes a global experience, spreading game logic even into spheres of existence considered non-recreational.

Then international distribution must be taken into consideration, due to modifications at this level of the circuit. Firstly, character names (except for Pikachu), which are essential to Pokémon logic. And in certain instances, as a result, the order of events becomes turned around: in the US, the cartoon that preceded the games is mistakenly considered as its predecessor.

Finally, another circuit containing inspirational derivatives—new fictional worlds or games based upon the principals of the original hit—are created. One is Digimon, a more combat-oriented and violent version of the pocket monsters.

Survival Beyond the Initial Incarnation

But what is Pokémon? A game, a toy, a work of fiction? None and all of the above at the same time. Given the number of products involved and its international success, Pokémon is a prime example of a circular or loop merchandising strategy that we cannot label. Furthermore, it forbids us from thinking that therein lies a referent personified via different products. Pokémon is not a video game because this format does not develop the characters of Pikachu or his trainer, Sacha. All the different products participate in the conceptualization of Pokémon, especially those that constitute what we've referred to as the three point strategy of origin, the basis of the world's fictional logic as well as play logic. Because Pokémon is not just a story, it is above all a game, or the complex meeting of a game with a scenario, or moreover a story whose script and its underlying structure are a game. Pokémon is the link between game and fiction.

In sum: a game was developed from a mix of various play logics, some from traditional children's play culture (insect collecting) and others from the modern game world. The origin is hence a video game saddled with limitations inherent to the genre, a game of spatial exploration derived from other games. But through this a minimalist storyline emerges, one made up of narrative elements that provide a

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[3] G. Brougère*How Much is a Pokémon Worth? Pokémon in France*, In J. Tobin (ed.) *Pikachu's Global Adventure – The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, Durham, Duke University Press, 187-208.

purpose for the game: a scientific presentation of the monsters, the relationship between children and the scientists studying the monsters, and so on. The television series develops the narrative as well as the representational potential, creating plotlines and images. Though play logic remains present, it is less visible, wrapped in a fictional work more complex than that of the video game where player action prevails. Play logic feeds other games and transforms itself into toys, bearers of other games. The card game further develops the play potential of the storyline by transposing it into everyday life. The collection becomes tangible (like the insects) through cards that are owned, traded, stolen and played. The game also becomes real in a duel between two children. *Yu-Gi-Oh* uses the scenario of a manga followed by a cartoon in order to boost the card game, which in turn became a platform for new play logic, revealing a play dimension already present in the *Pokémon* television series.

Pokémon cannot be considered or defined as just a video game because it is a departure point that once transposed onto other media, will be enhanced. Is it a "pure breed," something that exists beyond its transformations? This vision is too idealistic for such materialistic products, which are no more than a group of objects and of media that produce, reproduce, transform, enrich or impoverish Pokémon. Pokémon is the sum of all its platforms or rather—since meeting all the avatars is unnecessary to understand the logic—of the distribution chain itself, the movement that drives it from one platform to another, a principle of continuous transformation, in between reproduction and transformation. Pokémon is a circle.

Repetition and Transformation

Usually, each medium faithfully reproduces content from other media—especially content from the original platform—for economic reasons and also due to the stakes surrounding brand and illustration ownership. The proprietors—when they have the means—watch over and check the faithfulness of the reproduction to the original. The public equally expects the new medium to provide what it appreciated in others. The Harry Potter reader doesn't expect the film to be an original interpretation or a specific reading of the novel, but a highly faithful representation in images of what appears in the book.

This general principle comes up against the obvious impossibility of guaranteeing a loyal transposition from one medium to another. Each medium, bound by specific means and constraints, generates an in-depth transformation of the content from one platform to another, adding its personal touch. This is one of the reasons why what is in circulation does not exist outside the circulation itself.

These two principles need to be taken into consideration together. The transposition from one platform to another that considers itself faithful to the original is also an interpretation, a process of interpretative reproduction, to coin a phrase defined by Corsaro[4] when analyzing children's practices, especially surrounding play. It seems to cover a greater cultural movement, also at work in this case.

The study of toys, games and mass culture is now therefore one and the same. We are confronted with a circular merchandising strategy that manufactures the elements of this culture—a group of characters, stories and worlds—which are transposed onto a multitude of platforms. Pokémon is a recent but limited example of the advent of a mass world culture in which toys and games play a leading role.

It is common belief that toys and games are derived from more noble cultural practices, that they are minor accessories or trinkets of little cultural value that exist solely as film souvenirs or as a means to balance a film's budget, when box office or DVD sales are insufficient. There are films that leave their mark solely in video games or toys that do not contribute to creating a play world. This is not to say that such a world does not exist. It seems that nowadays, using the Pokémon example, a different type of logic is at work, one of a cultural world that cannot be transcribed onto one unique product; a circular logic of distribution that only exists on both a commercial and cultural level at the same time. The commercial benefit is obvious in the merchandising strategies used by major multinationals and in new forms of marketing synergies.[5] The cultural benefit is not always taken into account inasmuch as content studies rely upon one specialty per package, per medium. Understanding the circular nature of the network, its benefits; understanding the reasoning behind its hybridization; grasping how diverse media platforms contribute to creating something different—these are the questions at hand. As such, entertainment media (toys, board games, interactive devices) play an important role in constructing this world, and leave their mark. The game is thus present within the fiction and the reasoning specific

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[4] W. A., Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Pine Forge Press, 1997

[5] S. Kline *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing.* Toronto, Garamond Press, 1993.

to these worlds. We can find the corresponding play logic in the plots of television series, sometimes explicitly portrayed, other times more discreetly.

The Genealogy of the Circular Network

Historically, the concept of putting something into circulation is old but it takes on a new dimension with the development of media allowing for greater child autonomy.[6] It began in the late 1930's in the US with the comic book, whose shelf life was prolonged and further developed by television, a medium which is free, easily accessible to non comic reading children as well, and whose logic—at least in its dominant commercial form of today—implies searching for a target audience. The goal of these media platforms is to provide children with what they like. Therefore, following the comic book and radio, television became an indispensable rite of passage, at least in merchandising for the children's market.

Television is *the* place for promoting this culture and its products via advertising, but it is also an obligatory rite of passage towards success and market growth. The 1980's saw the appearance of strategies whereby TV series are no longer autonomous products but an essential link in the circular distribution chain. A series is created at the start of a multiplatform strategy to which the toy or the video game is added (as with Pokémon) for a supplementary dimension.

There are any number of examples of this strategy that essentially came about with the deregulation of American television during the Reagan years. American Greetings[7] and its subsidiary, "Those characters from Cleveland" (currently American Greetings Properties), as well as greeting cards, also developed imaginary worlds using a multiplatform strategy from the get-go, in which television was the key to their success. *Strawberry Shortcake* and *Care Bears* were big hits both as cartoons and as toys. The toy counterparts of each were immediately conceived in partnership with a specialist, Kenner. *Strawberry Shortcake* was first a successful greeting card heroine before becoming a cartoon and a toy, when a common theme—desserts and sweets—was introduced specifically for the main medium. The cartoon develops a fictional story; the scented toy exists in aromas based upon the theme. *Strawberry Shortcake* was launched again in 2004, 20 years after the original, as a new cartoon and with new toys created by Bandai. It is a fictional work, an image, a doll, an aura of delicacies and of a world of sweets all at the same time. It exists on different media platforms, none of which can be considered as the authentic source of *Strawberry Shortcake*. The fictional storyline makes sense because it addresses dolls and game situations. In this case, a new circular distribution network appears, in between two generations, the second created 20 years after the first, one that could be considered as an interpretation of a world of a different play and cultural context.

With the *Masters of the Universe* however, the toy came first; the series adding a narrative depth to the toy. But no matter what the order of events in the entire Strawberry Shortcake or Masters of the Universe collection, the "firstborns" were the ones who gave meaning to each of their respective worlds and derived products, more so linked to their growth than to deep-rooted transformations of their significance. *Strawberry Shortcake* uses a different three point strategy: 1. the greeting card (the "romantic" illustration), 2. the cartoon and 3. the doll collection. This can also be considered as the case with Masters, if we include the little booklets provided with the toys which offer important information regarding the construction of meanings in the "masters' universe."

Following these two American success stories, the Japanese took the lead with their *Power Rangers* concept. Here the real image is close to the toy. Each year the TV series is renewed with a new by-line and a new theme, enabling the development and staging of a new product line.

Let's take a closer look at *Power Rangers*, which enjoy a long life span but had a difficult time with the US launch, until a cable TV station agreed to run the series. Although the storyline can be considered weak, the script's simplicity refers to a game scenario. Beyond the film, a play factor exists, despite nothing, unlike Pokémon, attests this hypothesis. Hence, understanding a success linked to circular merchandising networks more complex than one would think. The conversion into a toy and a game is easier when based upon an underlying play structure, and on several levels: a scenario that closely emulates the good and the bad play logic used when children play fight, transformation (of an ordinary human being into a super hero) and fusion, a combination play principle found in construction toys (building blocks) which allows for the association of various machines and robot versions of the heroes in order to "build a super machine" able to beat the bad guys.[8] Three main repetitive scenario principles appear as play structures: 1. the game unfolds on the premise of a battle between two

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[6] S. Kline, *Op. cit.* and G. Brougère, *Jouets et compagnie*, Paris, Stock, 2003

[7] US manufacturer of greeting cards specialized in humorous and character illustrations.

[8] The dimensions of toy transformation, fusion and Japanese television series are analyzed by Anne Allison, *Op. cit.*

(opposing) sides well before it makes it to the television screen; 2. the transformation is based upon a play logic of becoming another; and 3. the most innovative: fusion, the Japanese contribution *par excellence*, which introduces elements of construction toys and provide new meaning, the success factor for both the toys and the series. These principles are transposed onto children's films, toys and games.

More recent successes have brought forth the importance of scenarios which include underlying play logics after these first became evident with *Yu-Gi-Oh*, whose television series theme is the game. This story, which started as a manga, is nothing more than the staging of a card game similar to *Magic*. It's a game inspired by a game profoundly linked to the interaction between the creator-players and the player-creators. Another less obvious example is *Beyblade*, the game of tops, in which viewers can tally the players' battle scores during the television series.

The root of all this is the classic game of marbles, recycled from a childhood play culture of collecting, trading, betting and competing. The success of many television series since Pokémon seem to be recycled from (traditional) play structures proven effective. Hence, games are part of mass culture for children and their circulation seems to take on an important play dimension, whether they come from a scenario or whether their circulation enriches a play dimension that wasn't there from the start.

Harry's Magic

We can provide counterexamples and mention that Harry Potter was first a collection of books brought to the screen that later became a series of derived products. Under the author's watchful eye, the book defines the content so Harry Potter cannot be defined by its circular distribution network. However, it all depends upon what Harry Potter designates. If it refers to the title of a collection of books, then this notion is undeniable. But our idea of Harry Potter is no longer limited to that. It has become a product of mass culture and cannot be reduced to solely a collection of books—it's more than that and probably less. It's the product of a circular network where the novel is undeniably the origin, the circulation platform is the film, using a visual and graphic transposition upon which other platforms rely: video games, board games, building blocks (Lego), toys and other products (clothing, food). Taking into consideration this circular logic, the novel is only relatively at the origin of the network, as the novel itself is based upon pre-existing elements—especially magic, the reference (world) it shares with other fictional work—into circulation.

We do not mean to discredit the role that Rowling's novels play. Without them and the interest they aroused in their early readership, no circular network would exist. It's the initial moment, like with the Game Boy and Pokémon, the moment that puts prior or pre-existing elements—via an incredibly unique product—back into circulation and making a new multiplatform distribution network based upon interpretive reproduction and transformations that create the circular world, making it possible. The wealth and extent of the network makes it possible for Harry Potter's world to be known by all, even those who have not read the novels.

If Harry Potter is so well integrated into children's culture, it's most likely due to the talent of its author, capable of writing a story of such potential. It probably also has to do with the use of magical references. There is a close relationship between play and magic: in both cases, the word is the action, the domain of absolute performance. With magic, it's the word that allows the acting out, as it is in play situations. This is very obvious in Harry Potter whereby the one who wins is the one who recites the right magical formula the fastest (which is childish) wins. The world of magic is a world of play, a non–literal world which presupposes rules, a founding ordinance for each act, an uncertainty as to the result and a sense of frivolity if we don't believe in magic.[9] Magic is hence a game whose consequences we take seriously. Imagine that the game becomes efficient, that what the child says happens; we thus become part of the magic.

Following the notion that there's a deep-rooted relationship between play and children's culture, the importance and the success of magic relies upon its underlying play structure. The reasons for Harry Potter's success are found in this indirect play structure within mass culture for children. Of course with Harry Potter we are told over and over again that it is not a game, it is magic: an efficient game, one to be taken seriously.

The relationship between play and magic is present in the some of the aforementioned success stories (the *Magic* card game and *Yu-Gi-Oh*) but also in Tolkien's[10] world, a source of inspiration for many games. The magic used in Harry Potter predisposes a world of derived products, especially

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[9] Gilles Brougère, *Jouer/apprendre*, Paris, Economica, 2005

[10] Gilles Brougère, *De Tolkien à Yu-Gi-Oh – La culture populaire du livre aux cartes* Faire sien Communication n°77, 2005, pp. 167-181

recreational ones. Wasn't it Huizinga that referred to the term "magic circle" as the temporality space dimension separate from the game?[11]

Other Mass Culture Games

It's possible to hunt for games in many popular productions. Hence we can read Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* less as poor literature and more as a game of child discovery, with which children can easily identify. Circular network also exists with Superman, the hero of the American comic book.[12] In the comics realm, transformation may be considered as a transposition of the basic play principle "I pretend to be a super man." In *Superman Returns* there was little or no difference between the example of destruction in the scene using a model of the world and the "real" destruction scene, proof of the power of the play dimension of action. It's a game, a world of make-believe. Popular culture prefers staging "real" events more than exploring them, using its own imaginary play means.

Other examples include the Disney-Pixar film *Cars*, inspired essentially by its director's miniature car collection. Undeniably, Disney's idea was to expand their product line to include boys, since most of their toys target the infant, toddler and girl markets. Here again, the scenario is a narrative transposition of a car race, a game boys often play. What better way to reach a specific target market than by borrowing its game and using it as the basis of the film's plot? One of mass culture's sources, including for some of the big blockbuster film productions as well as television series, is transposing play structures to create *Superman*, *Toy Story* or *Cars*. A complex rich philosophy in which child play culture is one of the sources of mass culture for children, explaining not only the reason for its success but its "play-ification" as well. These are easily transformed into games given that they are all derived from games.

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[11] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens, a study of Play-Element in culture,* London Routledge, 2000

[12] B. W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation – The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001

Game Circulation and Recycling

Following the logic that the first toy was used for a previous circulation strategy, mass culture's distribution network can be defined as a chain. There is no beginning and no end but a cycle of continuous recycling. Analysis of a link from ~~of~~ the never-ending chain of events resulting in the emergence of a new world, shows this "first toy" as entrenched in a culture particularly rich in "play compatible" elements. And a circular merchandising strategy that at the same time, both simply and complexly transposes that world from one medium onto another—editing, modifying, deleting and taking into account only that which is compatible to that medium—as well as adding new dimensions specific to the new platform: film images, cartoon images, video game interactivity, etc.

The origin varies, whether it is a television series, a book, a video game, a film or a toy. Films and television series, though a must in the merchandising scheme of things, are not always the precursors in these worlds. The video game is a key factor, as is the toy whose role is more important than once thought. Barbie, which began as a toy, was progressively enhanced with storytelling elements in television ads, books, video games and lately in cartoons and animations created for DVD's. The resulting array of products appeared over a much longer period of time; since Barbie was created in an era lacking today's accelerated merchandising strategies which Pokémon used to its advantage. The end result is the same. Barbie is not the doll, nor is it the reality behind a doll that never existed. Neither is Barbie the same as its avatars—a group as a whole so numerous and diverse that is impossible to grasp. Barbie is a marketing product that circulates from one medium to another, both enhanced and altered by this circulation.

Consequently, searching for absolute coherence would be in vain. Although it may exist, it is not indispensable as strategy is specific to each medium. The process of interpretative reproduction can lead to parallel logics difficult to superimpose. Each medium develops a potential world in accordance to its specific logic and no medium is *a priori* less important. Books, at the origin of certain worlds, become part of the merchandising chain through their widespread novelisation principle. Every part of the chain, every theme, product or object that contributes to the chain also contributes to its constant state of evolution, and change. Each and every "link" adds to its meaning, and sense. Generally-speaking, games and play logics can be considered indispensable when developing practices for these worlds. But they have as much to do with making the logic viable across different game formats as with perpetuating the world itself. The game is often at the source of this world as much as it is at its end.

All this has greatly changed the toy, witness to the emergence of this culture and of its growth. The market leadership of US toy and video game manufacturers (and increasingly that of their Japanese counterparts) demonstrate that these companies are no longer product makers but image creators. Behind these products lies the creation of an imaginary world for different media platforms. No matter what the first product—toy, manga, television—the goal is to master its merchandising chain. Bandai, the leading toy manufacturer in Japan and third worldwide, has reconsidered its market offer and presents itself as a developer of child culture no matter what the medium.[13]

The result is the creation of worlds of immersion. We know that the goal of many video games is to allow for immersion into the game. Yet isn't it the effect of this mass culture to offer immersion experiences for children? Walt Disney, who was ahead of his time, perceived this aspect and created amusement parks with this in mind. Video games are virtual amusement parks that further develop this aspect, but the effect is also the result of child saturation; a multiplication of media platforms that maintain a child in a certain world for days on end watching films, playing games and with toys, surfing the web site, trading cards and stickers, using school supplies depicting images of this world, wearing clothes and even eating biscuits representing it.

In the end, the game and its resulting interactive means of immersion are the center of this culture, albeit that this culture exists with non-recreational items. Despite the great media diversity that enriches this culture (and the toy manufacturers), the video game is the star—though soon to be dethroned by internet—and its emblem. It is a mix of game and animated image, the two strong components of this culture, integrated today into one medium.

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[13] L. Gallien et G. Brougère, *La grande dérive post-moderne du jouet*, Inès de la Ville (dir.) *L'enfant consommateur – Variations interdisciplinaires sur l'enfant et le marché*, Paris, Vuibert, 2005, p. 215-233.