A Synthesis of the 11th International Toy library Conference

Bringing games and toys to life

By Gilles Brougere Professor of Education at the University of Paris Nord where he directs the Experice Research Centre, author of numerous works on play and toys, chair of the scientific committee of the conference.

There were so many contributions that we were like children faced with so many toys that we could not try them all. And each of us experienced our own conference, the aim of this one being to place the toy, the plaything, in the centre while not neglecting the toy library. We can therefore follow the work of this conference by using the toy as our guide but keeping in mind its use in toy libraries.

Of course a toy library brings games and toys to life, it animates playthings, but what does this mean? There are certainly lots of ways of making them live, many ideas about toys and the role they must have in a toy library, as far as their uses are decided for them [1] These few days have have allowed a better understanding of what a toy is, and just as much what is a toy library, what it does with toys and what it does to toys. To put it another way, what a toy librarian is, what s/he does with the toy and what s/he does to the toy.

The toy, a pretext, a support for play used for the aims of the toy library.

"There are toys in the toy library but we want the children to understand that toys are not necessary for enjoyment. You can play a great game with a plastic cup" one contributor told us. In this way the toy can be a pretext, a support that can be left behind because something else is in mind, knowing how to play. A tension can be felt between the idea of play as an activity and toys.

The extreme position (like *The Strange child* one of the Tales of Hoffmann) consists of considering toys (all toys, certain toys at least) as being against play, even destroying play or certain kinds of play. Looking at consumerism, the commercialization of play through toys or some of them[3] a toy library might aim at valuing the player, to cater for him or her and to resist. To play and to not consume toys, to value toys (simpler ones, traditional or not) which truly promote play, to play together, to create a link between generations. This dimension ought not to be ignored; it made some feel uneasy during a round table organized for better understanding, when toy manufacturers described their methods of keeping their place in the market.

While not following this radical logic another position consists of saying that the toys are not important. If they have a role it is as a means of achieving the aims of the toy library, various aims that go beyond play into a social, cultural, or educational ones linked to family support. The toys are a means; there is no need to be too concerned about them, at the risk of under estimating the effect of the stock of toys. It remains to

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[1] To simplify the text I will say toy, but in most cases playthings must be understood, all equipment, games, electronic games, toys of all kinds without distinction.
[3] One could refer here to the keynote speech by Stephen Kline

ask oneself as some have done how to choose toys to achieve these aims. If for example older membership were sought, teenagers say, so that the toy library is not just for young children, some would call for the use of video games as a means of attracting those who might stop using the toy library.

Here the financial aspect may present as a strong constraint. Toys are expensive, hardly accessible, some of them at least, to toy libraries with poor financial resources. The consequences of this are recycling, toy making (but as was noted the laws of certain countries concerning safety regulations can make this strategy impossible), and the use of scrap material.

As Michel Manson confirmed an account of toys as tools (of development, of learning, of education) like that which in the 19th century fundamentally changed the way that toys were regarded by considering them a means of education (since up until then they were for frivolity). Toys became serious, seen as one of the tools for constructing the adults of the future (usually in a sex stereotyped way). With the development of preschool education inspired by Froebel, and then of child psychology toys became a support for learning, more complex, more difficult to understand, more technical but for which professionals (nursery teachers, toy librarians) could be mediators. It is one of the three rhetoric (understood as a way of justification and debate) proposed by Stephen Kline, that of play and education.

Play, an end in itself or play for socialization?

This vision of play however can lead to many contradictions. Is it about all kinds of play or only some of them? Should children be directed or left free to choose what they like? This view is caught between two extremes: to modify the toy so that it becomes educational (a serious game versus a video game) or to think that any toy will do as long as the child plays with it. At this point why talk about tools at all since it is enough to say that everyone learns or can learn in any situation.

This brings us to another view of play and toy libraries, where what matters is to allow the child to play without any aim but pleasure and enjoyment (the third rhetoric of Stephen Kline) The toy library has no other aim, play is an end in itself, and in some cases toys are necessary because they give the child autonomy. Between the two is found the rhetoric of socialization or sociability, play and sometimes toys become the support for that desirable social interaction.

The question is made complex by the way that play is perceived in many ways, and that the way the relationship between play and toys (essential, important, secondary, useless, rejected even) is seen, and the perception of the toy just as importantly.

In view of this complex situation it seems to me that the toy has often been left out of the discussion, so much so that there are few research studies on toys, far fewer than those on play. For thinking about toys, which I think is important, even if one chooses to be as far as possible from them, or their most commercial and contemporary forms, toy librarians have few resources.

Yet it is a fascinating object, which deserves to be looked at closely in it's diversity, in it's richness, but which also shows the changes in our world: material culture and consumer society, globalization and internationalization, new techniques and methods of production, the place of the child in society and it's relationship with it's parents,

the role of television and the media. All these can be seen through toys, and we have had a wide variety of views. I will briefly recall a few stages of our journey through toys during this conference.

The toy, a fascinating object, evidence of our changing world

From the start toys came and brought wonderment and surprise thanks to Sudarshan Khanna. They continued to affect adults: simple toys but they surprised by their action, and even when expected they continued to bewitch. There really is something in a toy which cannot be limited to play, which brings us back to the relationship with an object, from design to use, a toy both simple and sophisticated. It can be analyzed using the ESAR system as a movement toy producing a surprising effect. It awakens the senses by the pleasure of the effect it produces.

What is left beyond the wonderment created by the toy, the other theme found among the romantics, and this time it is to *The nutcracker and the mouse king* , another Tale from the same Hoffmann that we should look, the question is that of knowing how to put the toy, not into the life of the child but into the very nature of the toy library.

Because, many characteristics of toys, consumption, belonging, individualization, bedroom culture have no relationship with a toy library. It is this that is so interesting in this encounter. Contemporary toys are based around consumerism in a family at home, with the individualization that goes with it; it is not made especially for a toy library. What happens when they arrive in a toy library: outside the bedroom, in a public space arranged for meeting, sociability and sharing? Should there then be specific toys or are we looking at another way of encountering toys, a way of revealing possibilities.

What I am saying by this is that the tension is built in because the toy is not made for the toy library at least some of them are not. This would not be the case for social games which explains their importance in France at least in these settings, but also the greater ease and legitimacy of manufacturers in this sector, each having need of the other (to bring his games to life for the maker, to have access to interesting new games for the toy library). The tension is therefore more or less acute according to the products but also to the aims of the setting.

The tension is linked to what the toy has become. It is less with toys from before the new order begun in the United States in the 1960s. It is linked with television, which has greatly changed the offer; from this comes the nostalgia that is found here for the toys of the past.

One may also cite the reservations about the changes to Lego distancing itself from the basic brick (even though the company talks of returning to it) or those about Brio giving its wooden train electronic chips, a train now made in China (for economic reasons which might disappear tomorrow).

One could also speak of the unavoidable distance that cannot but exist between the world of the toy library and the commercial logic of the children's market and spin-off products, of the saturation of the child among many themed objects, a film, a TV programme, far from what makes a toy worthwhile. For one side playability is central, on the other is to be seen the spread of a mass culture based on cinema and television. Opposition is not so simple though because the question of playability is

also taken into account in product development (is the vision the same?) and is even at the centre through the idea of game play in the programming of video games.

What Stephen Kline showed us in his analysis is good. These transformations in the name of play values could be discussed; I'll let him off the idealization of the past. For example the gender character of toys is not new, even though one could ask why it still exists. I offer an interpretation: toys are not more gendered but the arrival of "gender" linked to advertising has become more dramatic. Why? Because all the techniques of marketing are being applied (target your client) but also because gender identities being less clear, more fragile, need to be exaggerated (but toys exaggerate many other aspects) to reproduce them in an imaginary world where men and women are more different than in the real world. And if that was a lament! Certainly toy librarians should place themselves in relation to this by banning toys that are too gender stereotyped or by ignoring them. And if the ideal toy library were not the one without Barbie, but the one where boys can play with Barbie, try the diversity of gender identities without risk of criticism, censure or even homophobia.

But we have looked at toys in other ways through their biographies analyzed by Cleo Gougoulis, that of objects in a family setting which continue to live in different ways: decoration, passage between generations, gift to another child (not all that often), gift to a museum. There are toys that live all their lives in toy libraries (but what a life passing from child to child!) and others that doubtless come from somewhere or go somewhere else. This is to put a strong emphasis on material culture, on toys and their history (Toy Story, the two Pixar-Disney films are of great value if closely watched)

In a toy library, a specific approach to toys

Certainly, these toys, video games in particular, are not always easy to accept, and we need to analyze them to understand them, to classify them, make them live in the best conditions.

But the toy library from the moment it accepts the toy does something particular with it that we have seen is partially at least out of synch with the preceding argument about the most contemporary toys. It is another life that is invented there. Here the richness and the variety of the toy library movement must be emphasized. I will not attempt to list how much they vary. What is there in common between a hospital toy library, a toy library in a school, a toy library in a neighbourhood of extreme poverty, a toy library for the exploration of sociable games, another that emphasizes family support with meeting and play between young parents and children, another that focuses on cultural events?

Bringing toys & games to life of course but in different ways, by putting the accent on the pure pleasure of play (someone said to me that seemed to be the case when making room for video games) or else in steering the play activities towards education (or different educations, either schooling or social) or interaction or any other aim.

Several times it has been a question of the job, of training, because to bring toys and games to life is work, requires competences that people have tried to define, with a new tension that can appear between volunteers and professionals (and secondarily between countries where professionals dominate and countries where volunteers dominate). It is about creating an experience without taking away a child's initiative and ability for action; to enrich his/her experience without taking away the skills that

let him/her play. It is far from easy and it is the toy librarian's paradox to make play her work but also to transform her work into play for others.

The importance of a practice or practices has been emphasized, several competencies that need to be documented to be understood. The toy library is what is made by the practices of toy librarians. Should we standardize them or try to understand the system? Should we tell people *How to make toys and games come alive* or should we go to see how toy librarians really make them live? The interest of such a conference is to be able to expose, to show these practices, to exchange, to be enriched and certainly not to transform them into norms that all should apply. If play is interpretive reproduction (according to the American sociologist William Corsaro) I believe that the work of a toy librarian is of the same nature. If it is necessary to reproduce because one can't each time begin at the beginning, it is equally necessary to interpret or reinvent.

This brings us to the often-difficult question of the recognition of toy libraries, a question that is beset with the tensions already mentioned. For one can at times fear that if it is only about the pleasure of playing, recognition might be less than if a social, educational or cultural aim were given. Acknowledge the frivolity of play (and toys) rather than abandon it! Even so why in a world as frivolous as this one in which we live, shouldn't it be possible to recognize the places given over to play? Why should (Olympic) games that take place for three weeks every four years be legitimate, and those which take place every week in a neigbourhood be not equally so?

Such a conference lets one sense the diversity of the toy library movement which do not all respond to the same needs, to the same interests, which don't open in the same context, which can therefore not offer the same thing everywhere. This lets everyone begin with new questions and new examinations about toys and their role in the toy library and not without answers.

Translation by Pat Atkinson