The Toy is the Message: materiality, imagination and play objects

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Commercial play, games and media culture is currently undergoing a rapid and unpredictable process of change. Digital and media-industrial changes today seem poised to eradicate any remaining distinctions between toys as physical objects and toys as virtual or networked media. Characters and objects in videogames replace dolls, toy animals, construction sets and toy vehicles; physical objects become peripheral devices to interact with on-screen characters (e.g. *Skylanders*, Nintendo's *Amiibo*s, *LEGO Dimensions*); children nurture virtual animals (*Nintendogs*, *Moshi Monsters*), reality becomes augmented or hybrid in popular smartphone games (e.g. *Ingress*, *Pokémon Go*); and digital gameworlds seem set to pervade everyday objects and domestic environments with innovations in the Internet of Things. Journalistic, parental, and academic reactions to these changes are often anxious, expressing disquiet about the closing-down of imaginative play in mechanistic, mediatized and commodified products populated with stereotypical characters and scenarios.

This presentation will ask about the future of toys in a digital media culture. Taking recent developments in 'hybrid' toy and game design and the 'Internet of Toys' - systems that integrate physical toys with digital game technologies and networks- it will ask what are the implications for game scholars and designers of game systems that span virtual media and physical objects? And in particular, what happens to imaginative play in a postdigital culture where actual objects and virtual environments interact? Are physical toys important? What is the relationship between tactility and materiality, imagination and play? Does the design of new platforms - hybrids of virtual gameworlds and actual toys - mark the persistence or disappearance of 'traditional' play with physical objects, materials and environments? What new possibilities are there for imaginative play in hybrid toys and games?

These questions will be addressed through reference to case studies drawn from the presenter's research on, firstly, microethnographic studies of children's play across virtual / physical domains, and secondly design research on the development and testing of experimental play systems and apparatuses that explore the interactions between technology, imagination, bodies and environments in play. These projects include interactive playground equipment and a robotic / augmented reality toy system. The emphasis will be on a theoretical and methodological attention to the

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interplay of imaginative action with objects and environments both digital and physical.

Game studies offers a wealth of theoretical and empirical material on the nature of play, the relationships between intangible software and rules with physical hardware and bodies, and on experimental games that explore the intersections of the virtual and actual. This presentation will build on this work to address the nature and ontology of the toy itself as a distinct and enigmatic element within the history and genealogy of play culture, and will suggest new directions for a theory of toys as ludic actors within this emerging hybrid media environment.

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