Is New Material Always Better? Plastics and Games in Finnish Popular Media in the 1950s and 1960s

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between plastics and games in Finland during the decades of plastic's breakthrough in consumer goods in the 1950s and 1960s. Primary sources of the study include digitized newspaper and magazine articles as well as advertisements. While I discuss several games and toys made of plastic, the primary focus is on the hula hoop, which became a global craze in 1958. At the time of the study, plastic was widely regarded as a new and useful material, employed not only in kitchens and bathrooms but also in toys and games. However, over time, plastic has come to represent a significant environmental challenge. This case study highlights how phenomena initially perceived as positive can later prove to have detrimental effects. The paper highlights the need for game history research that considers the material dimension of games and the challenges of sustainability.

Keywords

game history, media studies, material culture, plastics, sustainability, hula hoop, fad

INTRODUCTION

Plastics encompass a wide range of synthetic or semi-synthetic materials composed of polymers, typically derived from fossil fuels. As their name suggests, plastics are malleable and versatile, making them suitable for a variety of applications. They are also popular due to their affordability. Today, plastics are largely ubiquitous, often to the point where we no longer notice their presence. Jeffrey Meikle, author of the influential book *American Plastic*, has declared that “Objects of plastics have so proliferated that we take them for granted. Plastic has been naturalized.” (Meikle 1995, 1.)

Plastics expert Pasi Järvinen has argued that numerous ongoing global megatrends are increasing the demand for plastics, while their use is increasing in transportation, healthcare, energy production, water treatment as well as in the manufacture of various forms of machinery and equipment. Simultaneously, in countries like Finland and many others, there is a clear growth in plastic recycling, while new combinations of plastics and natural fibers are also being introduced (Järvinen 2017, 16).

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However, despite its occasional invisibility, plastic has not been "naturalized" in the sense of safely circulating or disappearing/degrading. Plastic waste is found on land and in the oceans, with so-called microplastics infiltrating everything in our natural world, including our own bodies. Plastics have become once again conspicuous due to climate change and biodiversity loss. Further, the production of plastics relies on fossil fuels, further contributing to climate change. Fortunately, alternative solutions are being developed, and methods for manufacturing and recycling plastics are advancing. Nevertheless, plastic consumption is rising overall, and so too will the amount of plastic waste, unless recycling is significantly improved (see Choudhury et al. 2022). In 1950, the world produced 2 million tons of plastic annually; today, the figure is approximately 450 million tons (e.g., OECD 2022).

However, this paper revisits a time when plastic was not seen as problematic but rather was viewed as a solution and means to enhance well-being. Meikle (1995, 1) notes that the entire postwar generation in many countries "grew up with plastic." Why was plastic considered a good material? What types of games and toys were made from it in the early postwar era, specifically in the 1950s and 1960s? What do the games of that period reveal about changes in consumer culture and material practices? This paper answers these questions and explores the relationship between plastics and games, particularly through the lens of popular media. What kinds of plastic games and playthings were featured in popular media during the era when plastics became widespread? How was the use of plastic in games and playthings justified?

Figure 1: A Finnish spinning top game, produced by Finnset, probably from the late 1950s. Photo: Satakunta Museum.

This study examines how the emergence of plastic materials was reflected in articles, advertisements, and other game-related content in magazines and newspapers. It focuses on specific products where plastic played a significant role, such as the hula hoop, tiddlywinks, the *Kimble* board game (1967), and table hockey. Of these, the hula hoop provided the most the most abundant research material, as the plastic hula hoop became a global craze in 1958, with the phenomenon lasting almost a year. For their part, the other examples never received comparable attention in popular media.

The primary source material for this study consists of Finnish digitized newspapers and magazines from the 1950s and 1960s, accessed through the Finnish National

Library. Combined keyword searches using “plastic” and “game,” as well as the individual names of specific plastic games and toys, were conducted. While the digitized archive does not cover all newspapers and magazines published in Finland during this period, it does include several significant national publications, such as *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Uusi Suomi*, various political and local newspapers, and major magazines like the general-interest weekly news magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* and the popular technical magazine *Tekniikan Maailma*.

The research method applied here can be described as contextualizing content analysis. This involved first forming the dataset through trial-and-error keyword searches, then recording search results and making brief content summaries and observations. Afterward, specific textual and visual content was analyzed more closely. The material was approached largely chronologically, from older to newer, without further categorizing the results into thematic groups. The result is a general overview of the relationship between games and plastic during its breakthrough era, characterized by faith in science, improved living standards, and optimism about the future. This optimism faced challenges during the oil crises of the 1970s, when plastic materials were re-evaluated, and Finnish companies, for example, resumed using more wood in toy manufacturing (on toy materials, see Nyman & Poutasuo 2004).

Mirkka Danielsbacka, Matti O. Hannikainen, and Tuomas Tepora (2022) identify three fundamental methods in historical research: source criticism, contextualization of the subject, and hermeneutic or similar theoretical reasoning applied during the writing process. While these methods are not exclusive to historians, they form the foundation of historical research when applied to studying changes in the past. This form of research includes game history, the methods of which have been utilized in this study.

Tanja Vahtikari (2024, 303) adds that interpretation through reading, whether close or distant, is among these fundamental research methods. This study combines contextual close reading with the broader management of textual corpora, as described earlier. Vahtikari (2024, 304) notes that while fundamental methods are a shared basis of historical research, “they should not be tied to expectations of methodological uniformity.”

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PLASTICS, GAMES, AND CONSUMERISM

Social historian Tiina Huokuna (2004) has argued that in Finland, plastics became a part of everyday life and domestic reality, especially during the 1960s. Plastics simultaneously became a symbol of a new consumer society. Huokuna claims that the widespread use of plastics was particularly apparent in Finnish kitchens and bathrooms, but in this paper, I emphasize that the cultural and material transformation of daily life was also manifested in toys, playthings, and games. According to Huokuna (2004, 30), the average Finn consumed 2.6 kilograms of plastics in 1955, a figure that had risen to 34.5 kilograms by the late 1960s. This significant growth in consumption, in combined with the multiplicity of uses for plastics, enabled a newfound freedom in colors and shapes.

Tuula Poutasuo, however, points out that despite being marketed as “everlasting,” this expectation of durability sometimes led to disappointment. People discovered that plastics were not always resistant to high temperatures in kitchens or saunas. In

response, the Finnish Plastics Association, founded in 1940 to advocate for the country's plastics industry, launched awareness campaigns in the 1950s through newspapers and retail stores selling plastic products. These campaigns instructed consumers on the correct use of plastics. Even manufacturers themselves lacked complete knowledge about the raw materials they used at that time (Poutasuo 2004, 22. See also Pohjanpalo 1983 on the plastics industry and the Finnish Plastics Association). Anthropologist Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (2023, 4) highlights that while "plastics have come to be defined by their capacity to be transformed during the manufacturing process, plastics also leak, contain, infuse, disperse, break down, and remain." She writes about the material ambivalence of plastics, referring to their ease and malleability on the one hand, and their fragility and persistence on the other.

In Finland, plastics were introduced to the public not only through newspaper advertisements, articles, and radio programs but similarly via trade fairs and exhibitions. The Finnish Plastics Association, in collaboration with industry actors, also produced educational films on plastics. These "infomercials" were shown in cinemas before films, as doing so reduced the entertainment tax paid on film screenings (Poutasuo 2004, 18–23). For instance, the short film "Uusille urille" *(*"To New Frontiers") (1953), commissioned by the Plastics Association from Suomi-Filmi, celebrated how Finland had transitioned from the Stone Age and Bronze Age into the "Plastic Age" (Nyman & Poutasuo 2004, 52, 61; Pantzar & Heinonen 2014. On contemporary celebrations of the "Plastic Age," see also Meikle 2004, 5).

But how did plastics come to be used in games? In Finland, one of the pioneers of the plastics industry was Sarvis, founded in 1921 in Tampere. The company was owned by agricultural producers seeking additional income from skimmed milk raw material, which was used in casein production. Casein was utilized to manufacture buttons, industrial products, and eventually, tiddlywinks games starting in 1922 (Koivuniemi 2004, esp. 40–41). Tiddlywinks games, where players aim to flip pieces into a cup, became popular in Finland in the 1890s, according to newspaper accounts. Similar games had been played earlier, but in 1888, Englishman Joseph Assheton Fincher (1863–1900) patented the game and trademarked the name *Tiddledy-Winks* the following year. John Jaques and Son, a manufacturer of sports and game equipment, secured exclusive rights to sell the game, though numerous others soon began producing and selling it under slightly different names (Tucker 2023).

Figure 2: Plastic tiddlywinks game from the 1960s. Photo: Helsinki City Museum.

The specifics of how tiddlywinks game production began in Finland remain unclear, but Sarvis did become a key Finnish manufacturer of the game at an early stage. As noted earlier, the tiddlywinks game (*kirppupeli*, "flea game" in Finnish) was something of a by-product in the company's broader product range. Many other early 20th-century companies also produced games and toys as a side venture to their main productions (Suominen 2023).

Sarvis sold tiddlywinks game pieces in sets of four or six colors, either packaged in a "flea box" or sold separately. In the 1950s, Sarvis expanded its product line to include a game called *Kiinalainen kissa* (*Chinese Cat*), with casein pieces and a playing board made of transparent polystyrene. Polystyrene was also used for other games, game components, and toys. During the 1950s, Sarvis began producing toy cars, boats, airplanes, rockets, and plastic yo-yos (starting in 1957) as well as sleds in the late 1960s. The company's official history notes that plastics were ideal for toy production due to their durability, lightness, and vibrant colors, which replaced toys previously made of rubber (Koivuniemi 2004, 40–42). These same arguments applied to many other plastic consumer goods, which often displaced earlier materials.

Figure 3: Box, plastic plates and some tokens of a *Kiinalainen kissa* game set in the collection of Vapriikki Museums Tampere. Photos: Jaakko Suominen.

In addition to Sarvis, a few other plastics companies were founded in the 1930s, but the industry's real breakthrough in Finland came in the 1950s, with many new companies entering the field. By 1950, Finland had 30 plastics manufacturers, a number that had risen to 90 by the mid-1950s. Hannele Nyman and Tuula Poutasuo (2004, 49) note that the "plastics age" for Nordic designers began around 1950 when

some started developing “salon-worthy” plastic products, including lamps and many other everyday items.

Gradually, toys and game equipment joined this range of products. Several companies still operating in Finland today, such as Plasto and Plastex, began producing plastic toys in the 1950s, and the use of plastic for making toys and games increased even more in the 1960s.

Different plastic materials were suited to different types of games. The most commonly-used plastics were likely polyethylene and polystyrene. Polyethylene plastics are lightweight, durable, and relatively flexible. However, they are slippery and difficult to glue, coat, or print on. Polyethylenes are divided into several types (Järvinen 2017, 20–21). Toys made from polyethylene were often produced using injection molding. Polystyrene, on the other hand, is a rigid and typically transparent thermoplastic that can be shaped by heating. After its development, polystyrene became an affordable, easily workable, and lightweight substitute for glass. While much of today’s polystyrene is used for packaging, it also has applications in household appliances, lighting, tableware, games, and toys (Järvinen 2017, 46–47). In the 1960s, polystyrene was used in table hockey games and the *Kimble* board game, though other types of plastics may have been used for various parts of these games. Despite the prevalence of polyethylene and polystyrene, different types of plastics were also utilized in the manufacture of games of that era.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLASTIC AND GAMES IN THE PRESS

In digitized newspapers from the 1950s and 1960s, surprisingly few direct mentions are found about the relationship between plastic and games. Plastic was more often associated with toys rather than games. There were, however, some exceptions. During the 1950s, direct mentions of plastic in connection with games most often occurred through sports and ball games. For instance, badminton, which grew in popularity in Finland during this period, became more accessible due to the introduction of durable plastic shuttlecocks. This was highlighted in several newspaper articles (*Savo* 1.5.1953; *Kauppalehti* 17.8.1953). Similarly, the use of plastic was noted in the manufacturing of footballs and rugby balls (*Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS)* 7.6.1953; *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* (*ESS*) 22.12.1963).

The utilization of plastic subtly integrated into games over time. Components previously made from materials such as bone or wood were gradually replaced with these new materials. Initially, the use of plastic might have been specifically highlighted in advertisements, but as time went on, the material became so commonplace that it no longer required mention (*HS* 4.4.1954; *ESS* 11.12.1954; *HS* 10.11.1956). For example, plastic game pieces were introduced in board games where players advanced based on dice rolls. Chess pieces also began to be made from plastic, particularly in travel chess sets, where the lightweight and compact material proved advantageous (*ESS* 11.12.1954; *HS* 25.11.1956). Jeffrey Meikle (2004) has pointed out how initially the design of plastic products more closely followed the traditional forms of the items that plastic was replacing. This was partly because plastic stood out as an unnatural and even divisive material. It was only in the 1960s that a more distinctive, synthetic, and futuristic design language began to emerge in some plastic products.

An unusual reference to a plastic-based game appeared in January 1956, when Finnish newspapers introduced a Hungarian game called *Tie rauhaan* (*The Path to Peace*). In this game, players moved a plastic dove of peace, inspired by Picasso, across a game board depicting a world map (e.g. *Turun Sanomat* 25.1.1956). Another less common game mentioned was the English boardgame *One Too Many*, described as a circus and construction game made of "safe plastic," promising to keep children entertained for hours (*Länsi-Savo* 18.11.1970).

One of the more popular games to transition to plastic was the tabletop hockey game. Previously made from materials such as plywood and metal, makers of the game began incorporating plastic in its production. For instance, Swedish-made Stiga hockey games were advertised in Finland not only for their unique goal indicators and ability to move players behind the goal but also for their durable thermoplastic construction, which ensured the game remained intact during intense matches. One advertisement emphasized that the "shock-resistant plastic" used in the *Tumba Elit Hockey* game–named after famous Swedish hockey player Sven Tumba (Johansson), was even suitable for adults (*HS* 13.12.1962; also *HS* 3.12.1962; *HS* 16.12.1962).

Stiga's hockey games received the most attention in Finland, though they were not the only option for hockey game enthusiasts. Stiga began producing hockey games in 1957 following Sweden's victory at the Ice Hockey World Championships of that year. Other Swedish companies, like Aristospel, had already manufactured tabletop hockey games before that. From the 1960s onward, the domestic production of hockey games emerged in Finland as well. Bock-Plast, based in Pargas near Turku, began producing hockey games in the mid-1960s and later expanded into football games by the late 1970s. Bock-Plast's hockey games included *Ice Cats* or *Leijona-Lätkä* (introduced in 1966), *Puck Master* (1968), and *Champion* (1973) (*Länsi-Savo* 22.12.1966; Keskipohjanmaa 17.12.1967; *HS* 18.12.1967; *Pargas Kungörelser* 26.8.1982).

Figure 4: An advertisement brochure for Bock-Plast's *Leijona-lätkä* ice hockey game in the late 1960s. Photo: Jaakko Suominen

One of Finland's most iconic and popular board games, *Kimble*, began production in 1967. Kimble was based on the American game *Trouble*, developed in 1965 by Frank and Paul Kohner and Fred Kroll (see BoardGameGeek). The Heljakka family received *Trouble* as a Christmas gift from relatives living in the United States. The game's commercial potential was quickly recognized by the family's patriarch, Aarne Heljakka, who acquired the rights to manufacture and sell the game in Finland. Heljakka changed the name to *Kimble*, referencing the protagonist of the popular TV series *The Fugitive*. For its part, the game also involved a pursuit, as players moved their pieces around the board and could "capture" opponents' pieces by landing on them with a suitable dice roll. The central feature of the game was the Pop-o-Matic dome in the middle of the board, which added a modern touch to the game (Sihvonen & Sivula, 2016).

According to oral history, Heljakka, who founded and became the CEO of Nelostuote, which manufactured *Kimble*, demonstrated the durability of the game in stores by standing on the Pop-o-Matic dome. The original 1967 packaging emphasized the game's sturdiness with the slogan "A strong plastic game board" (Sihvonen, 2017). However, no advertisements or news articles explicitly highlighted *Kimble*'s plastic material. Instead, the game was often presented simply as an interesting novelty or mentioned among other games in broader advertisements, listing only its price (e.g., *HS* 11.12.1967; *Keskipohjanmaa* 17.12.1967). The limited research material available to date makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the role of plastic in *Kimble*'s popularity. It is possible that by the late 1960s, plastic was so commonplace that its use on the game board no longer needed to be emphasized. However, *Kimble* differed from many earlier and contemporary board games in that its board was molded entirely from plastic rather than printed on paper or cardboard.

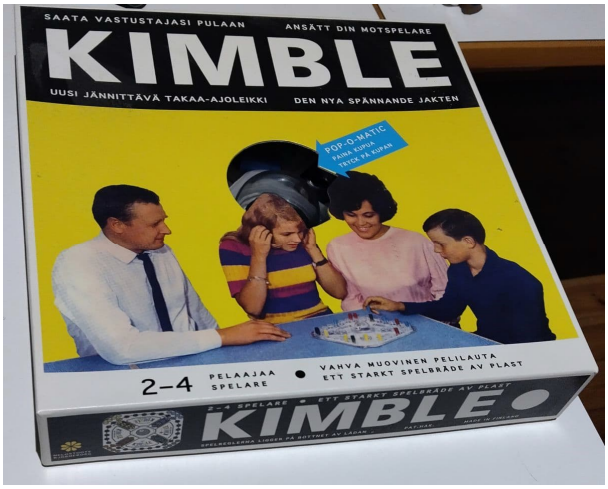

Figure 5: A replica of the original *Kimble* package 1967. Photo: Jaakko Suominen.

While the above-mentioned games were significant in the era of plastic, one play object became emblematic of the plastic age: the hula hoop. Twirling hula hoops became a global craze in 1958. In the following section[1], I will examine the hula hoop phenomenon in Finland and its connection to the material aspects of the toy. Interestingly, the plastic material of the hula hoop was already largely naturalized and rarely noted in news coverage. However, the hula hoop serves as an example of how a plastic object became a fashion trend and illustrates the life cycle of such trends.

The hula hoop craze was one of the defining trends of its time, merging innovations in material science with global cultural phenomena.

THE HULA HOOP CRAZE OF 1958–1959

The hula hoop has often been discussed in research and popular literature as an example of the consumer culture phenomenon of the 1950s, linked to both the material changes in consumer products and popular culture of the era (e.g., Meikle 1995; Winston 2008). Contemporary discourse in the late 1950s even frequently made reference to the hula hoop when discussing the triumph of plastics in society (see, for instance, *HS* 21.1.1959). As a new game and play innovation of the late 1950s, the hula hoop was associated with numerous global cultural and societal changes. It was one of the first consumer-oriented plastic products marketed worldwide via emerging communication tools and diverse media formats. The hula hoop also tied into the era's gender roles, body image ideals, and beauty expectations.

Since then, like many other products, the hula hoop has experienced several resurgences in popularity. Over time, it has become a significant part of the history of games and play. In 1999, The Strong National Museum of Play in the United States inducted the hula hoop into its Toy Hall of Fame (*Strong, Hula-hoop*).

One of the earliest mentions of the hula hoop in Finland appeared in *Kansan Uutiset* on October 4, 1958:

> "EXPECTED: a new craze called the Hula Hoop. It's a kind of hoop-spinning game. The player slips the hoop over their head and spins it in the air by moving their body. Reports from America indicate that everyone is hula-hooping at home, at work (wherever possible), and on the streets. Women see it as an effective weight-loss routine, and men use it to improve their fitness. Schools have started banning hoops after some pupil in a craze hula-hooped during class."[2] (*Kansan Uutiset* 4.10.1958).

The hula hoop was part of a chain of game and play fads linked to other product crazes (see Suominen 2023). Contemporary writing often drew parallels between hula hoop mania and earlier phenomena like the yo-yo and diabolo fads (e.g., *Uusi Suomi* 14.12.1958). Later translated into Finnish as "lannevanne" (waist hoop), the trajectory of the hula hoop's popularity mirrored many of its predecessors. However, the hula hoop craze bore distinctive features, being made of plastic—a departure from previous materials—and marketed with a focus on health, fitness, and its weight loss benefits. It's worth noting that many trendy play items of the time were tied to the available manufacturing materials and methods.

Hoops had long been used for play, sports, and rituals worldwide for thousands of years before the hula hoop, made with materials ranging from wood to bamboo. In 1958, however, hula hoops began to be made from plastic, which was more durable and lightweight than earlier options. The hula hoop is often regarded as the first plaything craze of the plastic age (Meikle 1995). Reports suggest that hoop-spinning with bamboo or reed hoops had gained popularity in Norway and Australia before 1957. Subsequently, Australia began producing plastic hoops. By 1958, the California-based Wham-O company started manufacturing hoops using Marlex plastic, a high-

density polyethylene invented in the early 1950s. The company also invested heavily in marketing, igniting a hooping craze in the United States in July 1958. Within four months, 25 million hoops had been sold (*Liverpool Echo*, August 7, 1957; *The Age*, July 20, 1957).

Jeffrey Meikle (1995, 190) noted that cheap, poor-quality hula hoop knockoffs quickly emerged, consuming vast amounts of polyethylene, which might otherwise have led to a surplus. Meikle further highlighted how polyethylene became an archetypal plastic type, associated more with disposability than durability.

In Finland, hoops had already been a part of group gymnastics equipment in the early 20th century. However, in the late 1950s, the hula hoop carried a more entertaining and pop-cultural significance (see, e.g., Launonen 2020, 27–28). The act of spinning the hoop was reminiscent of the Hawaiian hula dance, inspiring the name "hula hoop," though it bore no actual connection to Hawaii.

Following the *Kansan Uutiset* article, other Finnish newspapers covered the hula hoop phenomenon. *Uusi Suomi* connected the "hoop craze" or "hoop mania" to earlier American-inspired trends such as the yo-yo, rock 'n' roll, and the Davy Crockett fad. Of these, the first two are more familiar, but the third may seem less so today. In the United States, Davy Crockett (1786–1836) was a soldier and politician turned mythical figure of frontier folklore. The Crockett craze was sparked by Disney's 1955 film depiction of the frontiersman, a subsequent TV series, and sequels, which spawned a slew of merchandise ranging from recordings to towels and even women's underwear (Lofaro 1986, xiii).

The global popularity of hula hooping also originated in the U.S. *Uusi Suomi* described the hula hoop as a "weapon of good cheer," a health-conscious and lively craze that even moral guardians could not criticize. The newspaper noted that the hoop served as a party game, daily fitness regimen, and weight-loss method. It also brought people together, as evidenced by scenes of "grandmothers hooping with their grandchildren" (*Uusi Suomi* 16.10.1958).

Hula hoops began selling in Finland in October 1958, if not earlier. Once again, Stockmann's department store in Helsinki, known for introducing numerous toys and games to Finland over the preceding decades, played a key role (Suominen 2023). A *Helsingin Sanomat* advertisement on October 19, 1958, highlighted the toy's health benefits and global appeal: "All of America is hooping," and the device could make one's waist "as flexible as a willow twig." The advertisement also announced a demonstration at the department store the following day. Similar demonstrations occurred across the country (*ESS* 9.11.1958).

Figure 6: A hula hoop advertisement in *Helsingin Sanomat* 18.10.1958. Source: Finnish National Library.

By late October, Finnish companies began to market hula hoops aggressively. For example, the Erre-Tuote company claimed the hula hoop as a registered trademark (*HS* 24.10.1958). A week later, Kuopio-based Plastic-Sauma advertised "authentic American" hoops in various colors, highlighting the colorful possibilities of plastic manufacturing. It should be noted that vibrant colors were often emphasized in conjunction with plastic innovations (Huokuna 2004), while products' American origins were also used to market many pop culture goods globally.

By mid-November, a company named Muovi & Teräs (Plastic and Steel) marketed hula hoops with a focus on health benefits, under the slogan: "Health – Flexibility" (*Länsi-Savo* 12.11.1958).

Fun with Spinning

By October 1958, the hula hoop craze had rapidly gained momentum. Numerous Finnish newspapers published articles about this novelty item, discussing its popularity, spread across different locations and user groups, and its effects on health. Columnists tackled the topic with humor and personal anecdotes.

In *Ilta-Sanomat*, the columnist Kai de Puu (the pseudonym of journalist Matti Almila) linked the hula hoop to other American inventions such as "the dollar smile" (referring to American luxury cars), DDT, and rock 'n' roll. He described how even the editorial office had been captivated by the hoop, which genuinely got people moving:

> "After such excitement, we're inclined to believe those who say the hula hoop can make TV-immobilized children active again. Proof of this is the achievement of a 9-year-old American boy who spun the hoop 21,000 times in 3 hours and 35 minutes. If we ever reach such a spin rate, we'll start working as an electric generator, earning 15 marks per kilowatt-hour." (*IS* 21.10.1958.)

Almila also humorously suggested other ways to monetize the hoop: spinning lessons, hula hoop-themed songs, and a one-person municipal committee deliberating on

issues like the impact of hoop-induced weight loss on public transport capacity. (*IS* 21.10.1958.)

In *Helsingin Sanomat*, columnist SERP (Seere Salminen) recounted a visit to a major department store, possibly Stockmann, where a young woman in a red outfit demonstrated the hula hoop amid a crowd. Salminen also mentioned a lady she knew who had bought a hoop but made her young daughter carry it to avoid revealing herself to be its user. Her latter attempts to spin the hoop ended in failure and back pain. Salminen criticized such efforts:

> "People—or rather women—will try anything to slim down. Yet the simplest and cheapest method would be to eat less, that is, to follow a sensible diet." (*HS* 26.10.1958.)

The hula hoop and the conversation surrounding it reflected 1950s ideals of beauty and health, which were highly gendered. According to Katja Heiskanen, women were expected to maintain a slender figure, with magazines outlining the ideal shapes for various body parts. To achieve these ideals, women were offered weight-loss aids like massage devices, slimming suits, and dietary supplements. Scales became essential for regular weight monitoring. (Heiskanen*, 2014.*)

For men, physical fitness was less scrutinized in media but was occasionally linked to career and work potential. Exercise was considered a male duty, especially for maintaining productivity and stamina. (Heiskanen*, 2014.*) These notions also influenced how hula hoops were marketed to men and women.

The hula hoop frenzy extended to world records. For instance, *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* wrote about the daughter of a US Army major stationed in Germany. The daughter was reported to be a world champion for spinning the hoop for three hours (*Ssd* 3.11.1958). Later, a 19-year-old music student in Kuopio named Kyösti Tolvanen achieved a Finnish record of 3.5 hours, though he was startled into stopping by bumping into an onlooker (*Ssd* 14.11.1958). Meanwhile, *Helsingin Sanomat* reported a potential world record by 13-year-old Sirkku Taimisto, who spun for 4 hours and 5 minutes in Kausala (*HS* 15.11.1958). A few days later, *Uusi Suomi* reported on Finnish results of 4–5 hours but noted that in London, a schoolgirl named Jacqueline Sarwaker had already hooped for 7 hours and 4 minutes (*US* 17.11.1958).

In November, the hula hoop record craze and its media coverage had grown to such proportions that it became the target of satire by *Helsingin Sanomat* columnist Arijoutsi (Heikki Sakari Marttila). He humorously described how a fictional Finnish man, Anselmi Häkähuhta, attempted to reclaim the hula hoop record from the Fiji Islands. The challenge was intense, with official spin counters present to verify the attempt. During the record attempt, Mrs. Häkähuhta supplied Anselmi with liquid nourishment from the state liquor store (Alko), enabling him to succeed. Unfortunately, the Finnish Athlete of the Year had already been chosen, which Arijoutsi sarcastically noted was "a true tragedy of sports." He further jibbed that the official records of the performance and the record-breaking hula hoop were intended to be donated to the National Sports Museum (*HS* 29.11.1958).

The humorous takes did not dampen the competitive spirit. By December, spinning times kept climbing. For example, 17-year-old Veikko Virtaniemi from Joutsa reportedly spun the hoop for 14 hours and 5 minutes (*ESS* 19.12.1958). *Helsingin*

Sanomat did not address this but instead published a brief news piece about an Italian steelworker, Luciano Gedeone, who claimed to have beat the world record for hula hoop spinning with a time of 13 hours and 5 minutes, overtaking the previous record held by a Frenchman (*HS* 22.12.1958).

Beyond individual records, hula hooping became a staple at parties and pre-Christmas celebrations. It featured in events for Helsinki's Young Conservatives, inter-village competitions in Ostrobothnia, and even among Finland's National Opera ballet delegation during their visit to Germany. The hoop was humorously incorporated into various contexts, including photoshoots with Santa Claus and a Copenhagen Zoo giraffe. (*US* 7.11.1958; *Österbottningen* 24.11.1958; *Suomen Kuvalehti* 20.12.1958; *HS* 15.12.1958; *ESS* 16.12.1958; *Ssd* 9.11.1958.)

Figure 7: Hula hoop twirling at the Tuko (Tukkukauppiaiden Oy) Christmas party in 1958. Photo: Helsinki City Museum.

In late November, the State Procurement Center issued a circular revealing that hula hoops were being supplied to schools and offices for gym classes and educational purposes (*IS* 28.11.1958). *Helsingin Sanomat* sarcastically speculated on the political implications of hoop colors, suggesting red hoops for communists, green for agrarian party members, yellow for Swedish People Party members, light blue for liberals, and black ones for conservatives (*HS* 28.11.1958).

The record-breaking attempts likened the hula hoop to many earlier popular pastime equipment and paraphernalia, while the related news coverage encouraged enthusiasts in their own performances. Both news articles and satirical columns reflected a sometimes-ambivalent relationship with competitive sports.

In addition to counting the number of spins, people competed in challenges such as how many hoops could be twirled simultaneously or attempted to spin hoops on other parts of their bodies, like on one's arms, legs, or neck (*HS* 28.12.1958).

The hula hoop also spun its way into other areas of popular culture. Inspired by examples from the United States, Musiikki-Fazer released two hula hoop-themed pop songs performed by the popular tango and schlager singer Olavi Virta under the Decca label. One of the songs was a Finnish-language cover of a foreign song, while the other was an original Finnish production. A brief news item—or rather, a promotional piece—described these songs as a "cure" for hula hoop fever and referred to Virta as the "doctor" treating the epidemic (*HS* 31.10.1958; *IS* 31.10.1958).

The columnist "Orvokki" from *Länsi-Savo* praised Virta's performance and his ability to bring the songs to life. At the same time, she highlighted the fun of using a hula hoop—and noted its effectiveness as a weight-loss aid (*Länsi-Savo* 21.11.1958).

Perhaps Harmful?

The hula hoop often elicited amusement and was viewed as a frivolous, short-lived fad. Although, some newspapers occasionally reported on the more tangible negative effects of hoop twirling.

While in the United States there appeared to be little concern about the hoop's potential immoral or sexual implications, according to Finnish papers, other parts of the world were said to harbor such fears. According to news reports, the Indonesian government fought against hula hoops. Initially considered a healthy sport, the hoop was later deemed American decadence, corrupting morality, undermining local culture, and even disrupting traffic. It was said to threaten the moral fabric of the nation and weaken its performance as a society. Consequently, local police conducted raids and destroyed thousands of hoops. (*IS* 18.4.1959.)

Similarly, disapproval surfaced in Hungary, which, according to *Ilta-Sanomat*, was "the first country behind the Iron Curtain to fall victim to the hula hoop craze." Hungarian newspapers reportedly called the fad a "Western idiocy" that would soon pass. (*IS* 30.12.1958.) Such international news reports in Finland may have been a subtle way of mocking communist countries for taking capitalist cultural trends too seriously. Alternatively, these stories may have been used to highlight how, despite political ideologies, citizens of communist nations yearned for the goods of the free world. Even plastic toys became symbolic weapons in the ideological battle between political systems.

Hula hoops smuggled from West Berlin into East Germany, however, were not reported to be problematic in the German Democratic Republic. Nor were issues mentioned when hoops were exported from France to Central Africa. (*IS* 31.12.1958; *HS* 2.2.1959.)

Beyond broader campaigns, smaller acts of protest emerged. In mid-December 1958, *Helsingin Sanomat* published a brief story about Franz Kley, a German bachelor in his 40s, who waged a "lonely man's battle" against hula hoops. Kley declared the body

movements involved in hoop twirling to be indecent and recommended that German youth revive the old pastime of spinning tops instead. (*HS* 17.12.1958.)

Such protests and campaigns often reflected a wider concern for protecting national culture and traditional ways of doing things. Play itself was deemed acceptable, as long as it was conducted within the bounds of propriety and established local norms. The industrial production and use of entirely new materials, such as plastic, in these modern toys and games undoubtedly created a fissure with traditional practices.

In addition to the aforementioned potential threats to morality, the hula hoop was also seen by some as a risk to physical health. In December 1958, *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that a young girl in England had suffered internal bleeding after twirling a hula hoop for two hours (*HS* 12.12.1958). Another article mentioned that women of various ages experienced pain in their necks and waists from the same activity (*HS* 21.12.1958). Newspapers considered whether hula hoop injuries were primarily an issue for women This type of reporting again underscores the gendered nature of hula hoop coverage. The health concerns stemmed primarily from fears of prolonged, repetitive twirling sessions, often encouraged by attempts to set records for hours of continuous hooping. Such anxieties mirrored similar fears associated with many other play and media fads.

There were, however, also efforts made to dispel these worries. In early January 1959, *Helsingin Sanomat* reported on an English doctor who was not overly concerned about the harms of hoop twirling but did recommend alternating the direction of the spins. (*HS* 5.1.1959.)

Ilta-Sanomat revealed a more dramatic incident: a family in Helsinki reported that their hula hoop "exploded" during Christmas while watching television. In reality, the hoop broke apart on its own for reasons unrelated to its joints. As a result, the mother of the family became an outspoken critic of hula hoops. (*IS* 9.1.1959.) The same newspaper also reported on a case in Rochester, USA, where gasoline was stolen using a broken hula hoop (*IS* 13.2.1959). Clearly, the hoop had many uses, both as a whole and in parts.

Alternative Uses and the Decline of the Hula Hoop Craze

As the hula hoop craze began to wane, alternative uses for the device started to emerge, especially from spring 1959 onward. In addition to its mention of its use in criminal acts, Americans discovered that hula hoops could be used to search for earthworms: spinning the hoop would shake the ground within a two-meter radius, prompting the worms to surface (*US* 15.2.1959). A Japanese businessman devised a method to cut hoops into seven pieces to create coat hangers (*IS* 31.3.1959). A few years later, *Uusi Suomi* published instructions on how to repurpose a hula hoop into a frame for a shower curtain. On the same page, readers could also find patterns for sewing bikinis (*US* 30.6.1963).

In the final stages of the hula hoop craze, two main themes emerged in discussions. On the one hand, articles explored the reuse and recycling of the hoops, either whole or in parts. On the other hand, speculation abounded about which new fad might replace the hula hoop. While the replacement was not expected to be inherently superior, it was anticipated to capture the public's interest in a similarly novel way. Numerous candidates were thus proposed.

In summer 1959, *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that a toy called *Pikku Orby* (*Little Orby*), a suction-cup-climbing toy, had gained popularity in the United States following in the footsteps of the hula hoop (*HS* 24.6.1959). *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* highlighted "jumpology," an English "jumping craze" where participants aimed to take photos of themselves mid-air (*Ssd* 1.12.1959). Other candidates for hula hoop's successor included balance boards (*IS* 17.2.1960), medicine balls (*US* 6.2.1961), and boomerangs, which saw growing popularity in Germany as well as Australia (*Ssd* 4.6.1960). Another contender was a large Japanese doll called *Dakkoshan,* which featured flexible limbs that could be attached to various surfaces (*IS* 25.11.1960). Thus, the successors of the hula hoop were emerging not only from the U.S. but from other parts of the world as well.

Interestingly, Finnish newspapers did not prominently report on the Frisbee, also manufactured by Wham-O, the same company that produced hula hoops. While millions of plastic Frisbees were sold in the U.S., and some were reportedly available in Finland, they were often confused with "Chinese plates," spinning discs balanced atop sticks. These were also seen as potential new crazes. Early Frisbees in Finland were marketed using the UFO phenomenon, much like in the United States (*HS* 18.4.1959).

By late spring 1959, the hula hoop craze was widely thought to be over. In August of that year, *Helsingin Sanomat* published a brief article titled "Goodbye Hula Hoop," reporting on a London department store's clearance sale of hoops at rock-bottom prices (*HS* 9.8.1959). At the end of the year, the same paper listed the hula hoop fever as the defining event of 1958, noting that it had faded soon after the New Year. The article placed the hula hoop craze alongside major global events such as the Sputnik satellite launch, the Suez Crisis, and the Hungarian Revolution (*HS* 30.12.1959). This juxtaposition emphasized the hula hoop as a cultural phenomenon reflective of a new era of consumerism and the rise of the plastic age.

Soon after, the hula hoop was framed as a product of its time and relegated to the realm of nostalgia. A few years later, *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* speculated that the hula hoop's rapid decline was due to the lack of a pocket-sized version, contrasting it with earlier consumer favorites like the yo-yo (*ESS* 28.4.1965). By the 1970s, the hula hoop fever had become part of Finnish folklore. In October 1972, *Helsingin Sanomat* interviewed Niilo Valonen, a professor of ethnology at the University of Helsinki, who suggested that ethnologists should study urban and popular culture, including fast-changing phenomena like the hula hoop (*HS* 23.10.1972).

CONCLUSION

In 1986, the renowned American historian of technology, Melvin Kranzberg, introduced his so-called "Kranzberg's Laws." The first of these laws stated: "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." Kranzberg (1986) explained this law by noting that technology's interaction with the "social ecology" is such that its environmental, social, and human impacts often exceed the original purposes of the technical devices and practices. Moreover, technologies can have uses and consequences that differ significantly from their initial intentions when applied in environments for which they were not originally designed.

According to Kranzberg, problems often arise when scientific and technological innovations, previously limited in use, are scaled up to massive levels. He also emphasized that the role of a historian is to compare the short- and long-term effects of inventions, innovations, and technologies, which are often extremely complex.

These observations also apply well to plastic materials and the numerous objects made from them, including toys and games. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s, plastics improved the quality of life and enriched the lives of many people. However, plastic has today become a global environmental problem that we must address. At the same time, we also want to preserve the cultural heritage associated with games and toys, yet not all plastic materials are ultimately sustainable in this regard (Garda et al. 2020, 4).

Figure 8: “Space rocket” Fortuna game, mostly made of plastic, from the 1950s or the 1960s. Photo: Helsinki City Museum.

In this paper, I have examined the types of plastic games and playthings that were featured in popular media during the era of plastics' proliferation in 1950s and 1960s Finland, as well as the justifications provided for their use in games and toys. Plastics became integrated into games partly by replacing other manufacturing materials. Simultaneously, new types of games and toys emerged in which various plastics were central to their functionality. In popular media, the introduction of plastics into games and toys was mainly reflected in occasional mentions of the manufacturing material. However, there were times when the durability and versatility of plastic as a material, as well as the color options of plastic products, were particularly emphasized.

Among individual playthings of this type, the most attention in popular media was given to the hula hoop, which sparked a worldwide craze in 1958–1959. In the Finnish press, the hula hoop was linked to several other American innovations and trends in popular and consumer culture as well as to earlier toy crazes. Through the public discourse surrounding the hula hoop, we can also examine product cycles, the materiality of toys and games, and connections to aspects such as gender, physicality, competitiveness, politics, and the hopes and fears associated with new innovations.

Overall, this historical case study on plastics highlights contradictions in games concerning sustainability goals. However, by studying history, we can better

understand the choices people have made in the past. Research on games and plastics also underscores the significant need for comprehensive eco-critical game studies that consider the material dimensions and impacts of games and gameplay, rather than solely focusing on how ecological themes are represented in games (on eco-critical game studies and game history, see e.g., Backe, 2017).

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ENDNOTES

[1] The section on the hula hoop is based on a blog post I previously published in Finnish on my own blogsite but has not been released elsewhere.

[2] All the citations have been translated by the author.