The End of Play and the Fate of Digital Play Media: A Historical Perspective on the Marketing of Play Culture

Stephen Kline

INTRODUCTION

As Faulkner famously wrote, 'The past is not dead. Actually it is not even past.' As I begin to write this chapter, a legend about an imagined galaxy long long ago is preparing an invasion of global toy stores with *Star Wars* merchandise whose promised sales could amount to 4 billion dollars this Christmas season. Meanwhile, the hacking of a *Hello Kitty* website has released children's private information to the world, which perhaps is why the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) advocacy group is awarding their 'TOADY' (Toys Oppressive And Destructive to Young children) for the holiday season's worst toy to *Hello Barbie*, a networked doll that enables Mattel to analyze children's language produced while playing. And the purpose of all this commercial research into children's play culture is the desire to sell more toys. With these developments in mind, I want to argue that the theme of the 2014 International Toy Research Association (ITRA) conference—analyzing toys as communication and language—remains as relevant now as when a small group of toy

S. Kline (✉)
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada
e-mail: kline@sfu.ca

Fig. 2.1   International toy research association, 1993

researchers (pictured here) were convened by Brian Sutton-Smith, Jeffrey Goldstein, and Jorn-Martin Steenhold to reflect what was happening to play culture in the 1990s (Fig. 2.1).

International Toy Research Association, 1993 First meeting of toy researchers, Utrecht University. From left to right: Rachel Karniol, Stephen Kline, Gisela Wegener-Spohring, Hein Retter, Waltraut Hartmann, Jean-Pierre Rossie, Brian Sutton-Smith, Peter K. Smith, Kathleen Alfano, Gilles Brougère, Birgitta Almqvist, Anthony Pellegrini, Jeffrey Goldstein, Maria Bartels (assistant), Greta Fein, Jorn-Martin Steenhold.

It is said that those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it. It is also said that, as one gets older, one's hope for the future fades while history becomes more vivid in the present. In this essay, I argue that our commentary on digital play media in the twenty-first century needs to be informed by the cultural history of toys as communication media. We may not have reached the end of history (Kline 2015), but the marketing strategies promoting playfulness in the digital media environment of today remain a central theme in the critical analysis of play cultures. Indeed, I will

argue that the study of children's play culture at the turn of the millennium, as well as the emerging critiques of children's media-saturated lives, can especially benefit from analyzing the market dynamics galvanizing contemporary play culture in the postindustrial market. But before I give this history of modern toy marketing, I hope the reader will indulge this aging historian of play media for reviewing the intellectual history underwriting ITRA's decision to refocus our play research on the analysis of language and communication.

Those of us who were at the first meeting of ITRA at Utrecht will remember that, 30 years ago, play theory was dominated by an increasingly bifurcated debate (Pellegrini et al. 1995). On one side stood educators, followers of Erasmus and Locke, who conceived of a higher intellectual purpose to the playthings of children. Karl Groos's claim that play 'has a clearly defined biological end—namely, the preparation of the animal for its particular life activities' (1901) became a tenet of modern life: gaining strength and dexterity and establishing social bonds between them, these playful acts of the young helped to ensure the survival of both the individual and the species. And if play is the work of the child, then toys and games are the tools through which children acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills that will be useful in later life. Analyzing educators' commentary on toys in the classroom, Brian Sutton-Smith had argued that the idealization of 'playfulness' had become fundamental to education theories of development, learning and socialization in the twentieth century (Sutton-Smith 1984).

It was against this pragmatic rhetoric of play that Huizinga (1955) wrote *Homo Ludens* as a culturalist refutation of the modernist idea that human play was constrained by our struggle to survive as a species. In the introduction, Huizinga explained his intent to break with the biological, anthropological and psychological theories of play as energic release, as socialization, as learning, and as social bonding. For Huizinga, all these hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose. This pragmatic logic thus devalued play as a cultural force which he insisted always manifested itself as 'free activity' of meaning making—imagining, narrating and re-enacting the human experience through myth, ritual, drama, story, and song—that was performed for its own sake. We should therefore tackle 'the problem of play as *a function of culture proper* and not as it appears in the life of the animal or the child' to counter those materialist theories of play. 'The cultural

approach begins,' claimed Huizinga, 'where biology and psychology leave off.' Although Huizinga's focus was on culture, his method was philological. Spanning historical periods and cultures, his analysis of the meanings embedded in the word 'play' theorized play as the dynamic spirit of creativity that underwrote all meaning making. 'Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life. [...] It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.' The end of play, he concluded, was human liberation from necessity.

Believing similarly that games and toys express something intrinsic to the lived experience of human societies, Roger Caillois (1961: 35) agreed that 'the destiny of cultures can be read in their games—or more precisely in the language they use to discuss their experiences of play.' Caillois side-stepped Huizinga's arguments about play's universality as overly abstract—an artefact of Huizinga's lexical form of analysis. It is not just the language of philosophers that can be used to understand play. The language used by ordinary players was rooted in their experience. Caillois believed that play can be theorized as free, but not formless. Game play, he noted, is 'free only within the limits set by the rules' and the rules are defined and articulated by circumstances of that culture. Rules and conventions embedded in the social practices therefore define and constrain the freedom of play's meaning-making process. The language of play thus provided the games researcher with a cultural field that could be read as meaning making produced in very specific historical contexts about the experiences underwriting different expressions of playfulness.

Always a celebrant of the Platonic axiom that 'life must be lived as play,' Brian Sutton-Smith also believed that cultural analysis of play discourse provided an antidote to the bifurcated theories of play as either instrumental or transcendent. Sutton-Smith's research was guided by watching and talking to children engaged in 'folk play' which had highlighted a transgressive element lodged in the stock of cultural knowledge that gets mobilized every time a group of children sit down to play Tag or King of the Castle. It was not just that play was accompanied by language production but 'what was amazing here was how much shared knowledge there was across this group of children of the play forms of all the other children.' Rather than lexical analysis, he insisted that play culture needed to be studied as an organic practice of situated 'meaning making' which, in humans, was characterized by a multidimensional form of social interaction. By seeing play as social communication practiced by players in the

context of a specific material culture, Sutton-Smith set out to refocus psychological research into modern play cultures on this paradoxical communication practice rendering the debate between levels of cultural and biological analysis moot.

Although Sutton-Smith can rightly be seen as the godfather of ITRA, if toy researchers are to have a patron saint I would nominate Pieter Brueghel. In his painting *Children's Games*, the whole medieval community seems to give itself over to play with Huizingian abandon. In this vision of a community at play, games seem to be a free and voluntary activity isolated and protected from the rest of life. Work has stopped and ordinary life has been disrupted. Agreeing with Huizinga, therefore, one can conclude that games seem to be 'an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money.' But Breughel's painting also exemplifies the ethnographic researcher's approach to the material culture of play. Breughel's vision bears witness to play as both the spiritual force of culture making and also as an annotated inventory of specific 'games' sometimes based on material objects (balancing, balls, sticks, etc.) arising in the specific social and historical context of medieval Flanders. In Brueghel's painting, we see a medieval play culture as an embodied social interaction in the village square as a collection of 80 situated specific activities that are both expressive of the play spirit and materially constrained in their social practice. The material culture of play afforded the cultural researcher with a vista of play possibilities written as embodied discourses that get mobilized by the specific community of players in the context of particular social circumstances.

In *Toys and Culture* (1986) Sutton-Smith similarly argued that toy-play activities were not just acts of imaginative social interaction with objects, but paradoxical communicative practices embedded in a broader cultural context that articulated and underwrote the possibilities of playful self-expression. His own cultural analysis focused on the conflicting rhetorics and ideologies that characterized play discourses in the contemporary period—including those of players, play theorists, educators, and marketers. Beyond the ethnography of playfulness, toys signified the values and cultural traditions surrounding child-rearing, education, and human psychology that encourages and legitimizes specific play practices. As Gilles Brougère (2003) later put it, to the playthings researcher 'the toy is more than an object. It is a system of significations and practices, produced by those who distribute it and those who use it, either when giving it or when playing with it.' And here we see the advantage of Brian Sutton-Smith's

idea of focusing on the material culture of toy play. Regardless of the specific circumstance of their creation and use, modern playthings are socially constructed artefacts produced in particular historical circumstances of rapid industrialization in a market-driven society which produced thousands of new playthings every year.

THE PLAY MEDIUM IS THE MASS-AGE

Of course, Sutton-Smith was not the first to notice the industrialization of modern play. Noting the expanding appeal of sports, games, and toys in the modernizing world, Marshall McLuhan (1964) proclaimed: 'If, finally we ask, "Are games mass media?" the answer has to be "Yes". Games are situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives' (p. 210.) As McLuhan went on to explain, games embody a double meaning making, for 'as media that communicate specific cultural values and sentiments' they consolidate social experience. Games therefore serve to valorize the act of play generally. Yet, as 'media of interpersonal communication,' toys and games were also associated with the 'self-expression of players.' Toy and game play media, stood at the juncture of the social and psychological domains of cultural experience.

Seen as paradoxical communication media, both the encoding and decoding moments of toy play are rendered researchable, though not by similar methodologies. As models of our world, all toys are consciously designed as symbols—they point in some intentional way to the known social world, to specific worldly events, situations, objects, or processes. Toy design, and the promotional discourses that sold them on TV, therefore, could be read as facets of mediated communication systems which could be analyzed by isolating the ideological complexities inscribed by the promotion of playthings. In our rapidly modernizing toy world, advertising particularly provided a symbolic window into the changing human roles, rules, relations, and values that are invoked by children in and through playing with them. But at the same time, toys and games are also 'things which can be played at or with.' They set play in motion within a bounded imaginary space which gets negotiated and transgressed by players as they engage with toys and each other. The language of players also provides evidence of this meaning-making paradox.

Inspired by McLuhan's media analytic approach, I set out to explore this expanding zone of our mass-mediated culture as a bridge between two

cultural fields of playful 'meaning making' in a market society—the 'encoded' social communication designed into them by the toy makers and marketers and the 'decoded' personal meaning actively constructed by players as the toy's meaning is transformed in imaginative play enactments. As a cultural historian and play media researcher, I wanted to better understand this bridge in playful social communication. The historical account that I provide below portrays the changes in play marketing in three historical phases loosely underscored by changes in market dynamics defined by the industrialization of playthings, the marketing of play media, and the digitalization of play media.

THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF MODERN PLAY MEDIA

In a little noted passage of *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith comments on the link between playfulness and invention. Smith notes that 'in the first fire engines, a boy was constantly employed to open and shut alternately the communication between the boiler and the cylinder, according as the piston either ascended or descended. One of those boys, who loved to play with his companions, observed that, by tying a string from the handle of the valve which opened this communication, to another part of the machine, the valve would open and shut without his assistance, and leave him at liberty to divert himself with his play-fellows. One of the greatest improvements that has been made upon this machine, since it was first invented, was in this manner the discovery of a boy who wanted to save his own labour.' Playfulness, in Smith's account, was not only the force underwriting the lad's playful self-expression on the job but, through its material implications, an impetus to industrial innovation with profound consequences for socioeconomic change.

As a medium of social communication, innovation in toy design and distribution has also significantly transformed the play cultures of children. Gradually, the European craft toy making of the late-nineteenth century was supplanted by an equally impressive twentieth-century surge in industrialized toy making associated with the rise of the US toy industry. Although European train sets (of wood and metal) embodied the progressive elements of industrialization, too, it was the 22-year-old Joshua Lionel Cowen who created and successfully marketed a battery-powered train engine, the Lionel Train, which became the heart's desire of many young lads. John Lloyd Wright (son of the famous architect) invented Lincoln Logs, a construction set built on the model of a traditional log

cabin—which, like the Cowboy and Indian toys, speak of the colonial origin myth of the American nation. Charles Pajeau, a stone mason, developed another construction medium, Tinkertoy, after observing children playing with pencils and spools of thread. Perhaps one of the most telling examples is Charles Darrow's popular board game Monopoly, which was mass-marketed in 1936 by Parker Brothers at the height of the recession. Indeed, as Gary Cross (1997) has suggested, after World War I not only did American toy industries take over the manufacture of traditional toys—pull toys, dolls, plush, and models—but also 'invented' and then marketed hundreds of new toys rooted in the American experience and ideology. One might argue that, especially in the USA, craft toy making was being transformed into an industry which designed, made, and sold toys in department stores just like other consumer goods. With Eric Clark (Clark 2007), we may simply appreciate the restless creativity of the personalities that propelled the rapid expansion of the American toy industries in the twentieth century.

Cultural historians have long argued about the emergence of 'modern childhood' in the mid-nineteenth century. Although toy making was a long-established aspect of the premodern economy, the instrumental view of 'play as learning' helped justify the acceptance of toys as integral to a child's healthy development. Froebel's 'gifts' were an early example of how play could be incorporated within the curriculum of the kindergarten. The idea of play's benefits was transformative: by the twentieth century, not only did playgrounds and sports fields dot the urban landscape, but toy makers had begun to innovate in the design and production of educational playthings to supplement the traditional toys. Edwin Binney's invention of the crayon allowed children to draw and color inexpensively, while Playskool developed a series of puzzle-like learning toys specifically for the nursery. Sand play was introduced into the nursery and puzzles supplemented books. Especially after WWII, educational theory embraced the idea of social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of skill, construction, and learning games—incorporating a myriad of playthings into the very heart of early childhood education. Peter K. Smith (1988), a founding member of ITRA, documented how the 'play ethos' fostered a toy-based ecology of the nursery school.

But this enthusiasm for the pantheon of modern toys had its critics. Roland Barthes (1972) claimed that mass-merchandising had undermined the magical relationship struck between the child and the toy. The problem with mass toy production, Barthes argued, can be recognized not only in

their forms, which are all functional, but also in their substances. When contrasted with the hand-crafted artefacts of wood and metal, the plastic toys marketed today seemed to him graceless, lacking the charm and artisanal qualities of folk toys from previous generations. He laments the disappearance of wood, for example, which he believes is an organic material which does 'not sever the child from close contact with the tree.' He also condemns the plastic and metal toys of today for destroying the sweetness of human touch and sensuality of traditional playthings. He prefers the toys of the pre-industrial marketplace made from 'familiar and poetic substances' and in conditions of less alienated labor. In the diverse entertainments provided by modern toys—the kitchen utensils and baby dolls, the trucks, electric trains and car washes, even the Lego bricks—Barthes finds a system of commodities that is 'meant to produce children who are users, not creators.'

THE MARKETING OF PLAY MEDIA

As Clark noted, the US toy makers not only innovated in materials, production methods, and play values—but most of all in advertising and marketing discourses, which also became deeply etched into the design, packaging, and selling strategies of modern toys. And the pace of innovation in the US toy market accelerated as toy merchandisers realized that play media, like other commodities, could be sold to parents by advertising. As Gary Cross has shown, magazine ads directed to parents articulated the importance of playthings not only for kids' learning but also for their character development and psychological adjustment to modern times (Cross 1997). By the 1950s, play media had a dual life within the industrial market—as playthings which promoted playfulness and as playful commodities that were laying the foundation of the leisure industries.

After WWII especially, the invention of television afforded the toy industry a chance to further innovate in direct-to-child toy marketing. Building on arguments about advertising innovation in America generally, I set out in *Out of the Garden* (Kline 1993) to provide a detailed historical account of the evolving mediated market system in which the production, distribution, and consumption of playthings took place. Advertising toys directly to children on TV marks a turning point in the toy industry and the beginning of a belief in the effectiveness of marketing. *Davy Crockett*, a popular Disney-produced television show, demonstrated the potential impact of TV marketing directly to children. Soon kids were sporting

Bowie knives and coonskin caps across America. Mattel's innovative marketing of the Barbie doll on Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club* program with an ad that portrayed Barbie as a real teen model provided new impetus to child-oriented advertising campaigns. Commercialization of children's TV meant that toy advertisers provided almost half the financial base for the production of TV cartoons for children. Propelled by advertising interest, the TV industry itself innovated in the postwar years in children's programming, funded largely by toy and food advertising directed to children.

But TV was not the only medium for promoting toy sales. The first *Star Wars* movie was not only surprisingly profitable, but the spinoff merchandising, including licensed manufacture of the popular characters and technologies that populated this imaginary universe, were a wake-up call. The deregulation of children's TV marketing during the early 1980s in the USA allowed the children's media industries to further explore the symbiotic relationship between toys and TV narratives. They found that, beyond their ads, programs which visualized the back-stories of their action heroes—Darth Vader, He-man, Transformers, Ninja Turtles—could act as the flagship for a flotilla of branded merchandise from toys to lunch boxes. Synergistic action-toy marketing became the driving force behind a boom in children's goods generally, but a ten-fold increase in toy sales.

Marketing and Its Discontents

I began my career as an analyst of children's culture in 1984 partly motivated by my son's fascination with those 'action toys' advertised on children's TV. I was both intrigued and alarmed by my son's deep fascination with his vast host of action toys—the plastic superheroes and robots that were heavily promoted on TV. Concerned because the play narratives he orchestrated were ritualistic recreations bounded by the characterological framework of the TV characters. But I was also impressed by the range of popular cultural knowledge he derived from TV, and the imaginativeness with which he scripted the play battles, rescues and social moralities of this derivative imaginary world. Regardless, the intensified link between my son's playful self-expression and mass-mediated culture were on perpetual display in my living room. As a parent, I was not alone. In *Out of the Garden*, I therefore also noted how the changes taking place in child play also provoked a broadening critical reflection on the changing social conditions in which playthings have become mass-produced and distributed in the mediated marketplace (see CCFC).

Barthes was not alone in his anxieties about the cultural values being projected by marketers into children's culture. The American toy and game industry has been subjected to wide-ranging social criticism, including feminist diatribes against Barbie's impossible body and housewifely roles to educators' concerns about children's war-play rituals and the urbane brutality of *Grand Theft Auto*. So, too, the moral panics about the banality, sexism, and violence permeating children's media drew attention to the importance of toys and games in children's lives. No longer the cute baby dolls and toy soldiers of the Nutcracker ballet, the imaginary worlds conjured by toy and video game marketers celebrated the increasingly consumerist lifestyles and geo-political realities of our troubled global market society.

Given their popularity with young children, the militaristic superhero TV series of the 1980s have repeatedly been singled out. Teachers warned that many boys were so fascinated with these new televised superheroes that they were assimilating the aggressive back-stories and re-enacting them in a highly ritualized form of 'war play' (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1987). Unlike the toy truck or baby doll, promotional toys retained no direct correspondence with familiar objects in the real world, but rather to dramatized crystallizations of fictional fields—scripted to refer to mythic worlds-in-conflict. Yet, as Umberto Eco has noted, toy soldiers are a very old play medium which refer paradoxically both to the real world in which soldiers are associated with violence and killing, and to the imaginary world of playful possibility. In play, the soldier takes on a new transcendent meaning by becoming the embodiment of the players' ability to express their inner needs, conflicts, and ideas with toys. The excitement that sometimes accompanies young boys' war play has led many daycare facilities and kindergartens to banish these toys from schools—yet the same exuberance has also been heralded as a sign both of the vitality of meaningful 'free play' and of the value of the play ethos (Goldstein 1998).

Ironically, these evolving critiques of commercialized media are so well known that they have provided the back-story for a recent revival of traditional toys. In the trilogy of films called *Toy Story*, the Disney Corporation has articulated an entertaining critical reflection on the special bond between children and toys, forged before the marketers got involved. In the first film, *Toy Story I*, the transformation of TV character marketing of the 1980s is the backdrop for the disruption of the play universe of contemporary children. Andy is a typical suburban kid with a special affection for his favorite toy, a 1950s-style cowboy rag doll, named Woody.

Woody belongs to the universe of traditional play values grounded in the assumption that the meaning of a toy arises from its owner's devotion to imaginative play—rather than the themes inscribed into its commodity form by the mediated marketplace.

Woody is the leader of a similarly tradition-minded collection of toys dating from the 1950s, including a Mr and Mrs Potato Head, Little Bo Peep, a Slinky dog, and a host of small lead toy soldiers. The drama unfolds when a brand-new Buzz Lightyear toy is introduced into the playroom, which both rivals Woody in Andy's affections and vies with his homespun style for leadership of the gang of toys. Metaphorically speaking, Buzz threatens to replace the backward-looking, but good-natured frontier myth with a futuristic high-tech bravado encapsulated in his hard-wired slogan of 'to infinity and beyond.' The deeper problem for traditional toys, however, is that Buzz takes himself seriously: he doesn't understand that he is *just a toy.* His pre-programmed scripting lacks both imagination and an understanding of the mission of all toys—to be played with enthusiastically. Buzz thus represents the revolution in play values wrought in children's media culture. Yet gradually the friendship develops between Woody and Buzz into a lasting cooperation through their mutual interest in stimulating Andy's playful imagination. The seemingly opposing play values can be resolved if Buzz learns the code of the toy world.

But in *Toy Story II*, Woody's identity as a traditional toy is itself called into question. While trying to rescue Wheezy the Penguin (whose voice box failed) from the lawn sale (the fate of toys no longer loved by their owner), Woody is stolen by an unscrupulous owner of Al's Toy Barn who has now completed a 'collectors' set' of promotional toys to be sent to a toy museum in Japan. Taken to the inner sanctum of the toy store, Woody has an identity crisis. He is only a damaged rag doll supplanted in the affections of Andy by the high-tech playthings of today. Once Woody's arm is repaired, he is ready to be packed for the museum where he makes a fabulous discovery: he is not just a toy like others after all, but a renowned and highly valued antique toy—the prototype TV promotional toy. His character was the centerpiece of one of the 1950s' most popular TV shows with a theme song, horse (Bullseye), and two side-kicks—Stinky Pete the aging prospector, and Jessie the yodelling cowgirl. But that is not all, for as one of America's original TV toys, he has left his impression on a universe of consumer paraphernalia from children's cowboy hats to themed record players. When Buzz and gang arrive to rescue him, Woody has to make a difficult choice: to return to the true meaning of playtime through

enriching the imagination of children, or to be immortalized as a collector's commodity.

Although Woody chooses to remain a play companion, the inevitable end of all toys happens in *Toy Story III*, as Andy, now heading off to college, must rid himself of the accumulated playthings of his childhood. As children grow up, toys lose their special role of sparking the child's imagination. For as adults, we must resign ourselves to a regime of work that leaves little scope for truly imaginative play. In the metaphor of the overcrowded toy box, we have a powerful allegory for the crisis of consumer culture that has embraced abundance over creative imagination. Without children to play with, toys are reduced to simple commodities— decorations, collectables, memorabilia—or waste. Their special meaning granted by the child's love of play evaporates and they become clutter, trophies, nostalgic commemorations of the simple pleasures that one knows in childhood. But they are no longer playthings. The only way to be true to their mission is to find another child who will play with them. But here the story gets darker, for the gang of toys are recycled to a nursery where children have lost the ability to play imaginatively. In this ironic twist, the abundance of toys in the market is the undoing of a sustainable play culture. The children are merciless with their toys: they smash, break, throw, kick, and crush them, rather than play imaginatively. A better choice for Woody might have been the toy museum, after all. Like all Disney films, it has a happy ending. Woody and his gang find the one imaginative child at the nursery. Andy goes to university, assured that his toys have not been renounced, but have found an appropriate place to keep that potential 'gleam of freedom' alive. Yet the dystopian vision of the nursery in the digital age lingers in my mind like the smell of burning leaves on an autumn evening.

Digital Play and Synergistic Media Culture

In *Out of the Garden*, I tried to show how deregulation of children's television helped to expand the market for promotional toys by forging marketing synergies between visualized story-telling and play media. But in that work, I ignored an important phenomenon impacting children's play media in the 1980s—namely, the technological synergy linking the TV set to a game console. In *Digital Play* (Kline et al. 2003), I set out to make up for this oversight by analyzing the many ways that innovations in communication technologies continued to underscore the expansion of play media. What I

concluded, however, was that digital gaming flourished from innovations in the business models and promotional strategies as much as from the technological inventions underwriting the expansion of video game markets from 5 billion in 1985 (when the industry separated from the toy and game industry) to the 80 billion-dollar industry it is now. The trajectories inscribing the evolution of play media were technology markets and culture. Dubbed the three circuits model, a historical framework was developed as a temporal map to guide an exploration of the interplay between technological innovation (i.e. chips, interface design, 3D graphics and sound, joysticks, smartphones) and changing play practices (game design, new genres, online gaming, gaming olympics) in the constantly dynamic digitalizing marketplace. The new media of pods, pads, and smartphones have since provided a second impetus to this expansion of a digitally synergistic media system, resulting in new gaming forms and practices.

My work has emphasized the role that marketing innovations play in the transformations of contemporary children's culture. I can find no better example for my argument about why toy-play researchers need to be mindful of marketing synergies as much as technological innovations than the case of Lego's recent return to profitability. As Stig Hjarvard (2013) has argued, the recent mediatization of Lego demonstrates that even this quintessentially modernist construction toy can be promoted as an 'imaginary invocation' of mediated fantasies. Originally conceived as a simple brick with which children could 'endlessly' reconstruct miniatures of their changing world, Lego now includes computer-controlled versions of robotic buildings, sexually coded construction sets, and a *Star Wars* video game which references its redesigned toy characters, as well as its own film celebrating Lego values to rival *Toy Story*. In our media-saturated society, toys are no longer 'just playthings.' But neither are they 'just commodities.' Lego is no longer a simple construction toy, but a road map to digital play culture—and the discourses that embedded their use. I have since wasted a lot of ink noting how the same instrumental rhetoric that justified toys as learning technologies came to legitimize the use of computers, robots, and digital devices of all kinds in today's classrooms and living rooms (Kline 2003a, b). The promotional rhetoric surrounding the sale of digitally enhanced toys is familiar. Speaking of the burgeoning sales of tech toys that took the 2016 Toy Fair by storm, the industry declared: 'Parents and educators appreciate these toys because they help prep kids for school by building   important   spatial,   reasoning,   critical   thinking,   and problem-solving skills' (TIA 2016). In this respect, I assert that research

into the material culture of play needs to be reminded of the market's continuity, as much as of the technological innovations that are shaping the play cultures of the future.

In a chapter entitled 'Not Just Playthings,' a recent market research report from the NPD Group notes that innovation in American toy design and marketing has helped this industry span the globe (Gifts and Toys 2009). Over 2000 new toys enter the marketplace each year, and the average child in the affluent west can own over 300 toys. The 'not just' reference in the report chapter's title refers to the now accepted idea that the toy and games sector is not to be taken lightly—either culturally or economically. While North America still represents 30% of a worldwide toy market, it is closely followed by Europe at 29%, and Asia at 27%. This report estimates that the global toy trade is worth upwards of US $80 billion. This figure approaches $160 billion if video games are included in the estimate, and a lot more if the whole communication sector is taken into account. Household spending on communication has more than doubled over the last 20 years in developed countries, as digital communication fuels growth of the 'entertainment economy.' Communication media—including toys, video games, and smartphones—are no longer luxuries, but the primary interface between human beings and the engine of economic expansion. For this reason, I am not the only one who believes that digital playthings are the cultural foundation of an expansionary entertainment economy—not only because it is profitable and growing steadily, but because play media for children is one expense that consumers refuse to cut back on, even in a recession.

McLuhan once explained that, in the electronic era, media analysis is best served by 'studying media as cultural environments.' I have interpreted this to mean that if the 'medium is the mass-age' then the message of digital culture is synergistic marketing communication. The hyper-commercialization of play culture has not only magnified toy and game industry profits, but also spawned new critiques of commercialization that augmented the standard critiques of war play and sexist role modeling that agitated the critics of the 1980s. Again, confirming prior insights into mediated market environments, my work has highlighted how, once again, synergies between technological innovation and changing cultural values in online communities have underwritten growth of digital play culture rather than transformed it. As McLuhan foresaw, the prior play media have defined the content of new ones. According to a recent NPD report, American toy sales are arising from the ashes of recession with 6% growth in

sales: 'Out of the 11 super categories within toys, eight of them posted gains, with Action Figures and Dolls experiencing the highest dollar growth' (*Gifts and Toys,* December 2016). So too, in the new millennium, public opprobrium for the dystopian commercial spectacle has shifted online to the websites and social media platforms that provide the promotional front end for children's trans-mediated synergistic marketing of today (CCFC 2015). For the next generation of playthings researchers and children's culture critics, advergaming and social media have provided an ample challenge for the future of play media analysts. Pace Faulkner.

Ironically, some early digital play enthusiasts, Douglas Rushkoff and Sherry Turkle for example, are now engaged in critical commentary on the future of play culture. At least their commentary on what is now called 'social media' is more realistic about the relationship between technological innovation and cultural change in mediated markets: the same social media that enable gamers from around the world to work as teams also allow terrorists to recruit and spread hatred, children to bully and insult, and cyber criminals to steal identities (Kline 2015). Play researchers should no longer think idealistically about toys as isolated media, but must, as Sutton-Smith insisted, think critically about the intersecting, and often competing, material discourses that inscribe a toy's paradoxical communication. As play media researchers, we should be aware that, in the contemporary mediated marketplace, toy design and marketing have been integrated into the synergistic media environment which is laying the foundation of both the future entertainment economy and children's culture.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Kline is a Professor Emeritus in the School of Communication and Director of the Media Analysis Laboratory at Simon Fraser University, Canada. He is the author of *Out of the Garden* (Verso 1993) and *Digital Play* (MQUP 2003) and *Globesity, Food Marketing and Family Lifestyles* (Palgrave 2011).