Toys as Media:

The Role of Toy Design, Promotional TV and Mother's Reinforcement in the Young Males (3-6) Acquisition of Pro-social Play Scripts for Rescue Hero Action Toys.

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ABSTRACT

It is appropriate in the light of the theme of this conference, to ask what do we really know about how toys communicate. This paper describes my recent attempt to provide a communication analysis of the action toy focusing on a study of boys aged 3-6 as they play with Rescue Heroes. Given the extent that aggressive and militaristic themes are well established in today's super-hero play culture, Fisher Price conceived of a new action toy as an antidote to the war like and controversial "warrior heroes" that have become popular recently (GI Joe, Ninja Turtles and Morphin Power Rangers). Rescue Heroes are designed as a non-violent and pro-social line of "action toys" with corresponding accessories, video and marketing campaigns scripted around more realistic rescue actions.

As the first pro-social action toys to be marketed with a TV programme, Rescue Heroes provide an opportunity to study the impact of communicating pro-social symbolics to this target group steeped in the traditions of action hero play. This research observed the 'free play' of thirty young boys between the ages of 3-6 both before and after introduction to the rescue heroes line in order to discover whether and how the 'prosocial' play scripting was communicated to them. By controlling the child's exposure to the promotional video material and prompting parental coaching in the "hands on" condition we sought to isolate the part that toy design, promotional material and parental support play in the child's acquisition and deployment of non-aggressive play scenes with action toys.

The War Toy Debate: Concerns about War Play

When promoted by tie-in TV shows and saturation marketing campaigns, the action toy contributed significantly to the overall growth in the toy market during the 1980's (Kline 1993). The muscular designs and deadly powers designed into to these 'superhero characters', when communicated through their programmes, packaging, and advertising has also helped make ritualized clashes between 'good guys and bad guys' a common scene in the playrooms, nurseries and kindergartens of many countries. Occasional fights and injuries on the playground ensured that the war toy debate has surfaced repeatedly

in Canada, as in other countries, throughout the last decade.

Because of the popularity of these seemingly militaristic super-hero TV series, critics have repeatedly warned that many boys were so fascinated with televised heroes that they were assimilating the aggressive backstories and re-enacting them in a highly ritualized form of 'war play' (Carlson Paige and Levine 1988). Benjamin Singer's study of the effects of TV on play had documented the influence of TV progammes on children's play -- but he also has noted that such effects varied with the family's mediation and support for their children's imaginative play (Singer 1981, 1983, 1995). Noting the growing synergy between play and TV, other researchers have suggested that the promotional television programming intensifies the boys fascination with the play universe (Argenta 1985) thus increases identification with the characters (Vadja 1996) and potentially narrows the scope of creative social play narratives and values (Kline 1995). Pursing this argument, Greenfield et. al. (1989) found that the prior watching of a toy-related television programme reduced the creative story telling of the children exposed to them.

Yet as Sutton-Smith has noted toy soldiers are a very old play media which refer paradoxically to the both the real world in which soldiers are associated with violence and killing, and to the imaginary world of possibility that can be created by the player through the modality of play. In play, the soldier takes on a new transcendent meaning as a toy by becoming the embodiment of the player's ability to express their inner needs, conflicts and ideas with toys. The excitement that sometimes accompanies young boys' war play has led many day care and kindergartens to banish these toys from schools—yet the same exuberance has also been both heralded as a sign of the vitality of meaningful 'free play' (Goldstein 1993, 1995). As Wegener-Spohring (1993) has observed even in the absence of war toys, young children will still play highly aggressive fantasy games often learning to negotiate and manage complex social relations and feelings in the process. Similarly rough and tumble play has often been misread as real conflict rather than an important part of young boys social friendship formation and emotional testing of boundaries. (Humpheries and Smith 1993). Super-hero play among young boys doesn't always take the form of meaningless ritualized aggression either, but has elements of complex social negotiation (Brougere 1996) and story telling (Mouritsen 1996).

With these issues in mind Sutton Smith saw nothing new or alarming in these so-called war toys -- the high energy rough and tumble confrontation rituals are simply a continuation of the lively folk-play traditions and a healthy aspect of children's folkways (1996). Sutton-Smith rebukes the restrictive anxiety of parents and teachers arguing that boys have always played chase, escape and rescue games with their toy soldiers and structured their play around human conflict and power relations. We should learn to value the humorous derision, mock aggression, high energy involvements, assimilative learning, ironic reference and minor rebelliousness that are essential elements of this cultural force of play, even when it appears to be violent he argues. And so in some senses the war toy debate reflects larger debates in cultural studies about the paradoxical nature of communication. In fact, Sutton-Smith defines play as paradoxical communication.

Yet we find that a decade after this War Toys debate first emerged, the concern about violence in children's TV, toys and video games has not abated (Dill and Dill 1998). Many Canadian parents believe

super-hero action toys accentuate aggressive play routines and anti-social acting out contributing to the socialization of aggressive boys. We heard repeatedly from the mothers in this study too that the common effect of watching action heroes on TV is that it influences their son's play. Most mothers were therefore rather concerned about superhero toys because they had observed the effects of televised programmes on their boys play directly and experienced a growing link between the maleness and the aggressiveness of their young boys (Kline 1999). One mother spoke for many when she said "just the fighting I don't know what it is. It does seem like boys get more into that [fighting]". Another said of her four year old son "he just got into action figures, definitely has bad guys and good guys" and he began to talk " about fighting off bad guys a lot". The mothers seemed to reflect thoughtfully about their sons in terms of the conjuncture of gender and playful aggressivenss deciding it is only problematic when it results in real aggression:

"I really believe it starts from the beginning, how the parents will direct the boys. Like I said with these mixed messages we are getting—boys are tougher, they fight—I don't think there is much wrong with wrestling they have to get rid of their energy, that's a normal need. But when they get the message don't be a baby, don't cry like a girl then they automatically get the message that they have to toughen up, so fighting is OK -- and it is OK but depending on how they do it. If everywhere they see on TV or other kids that are hitting each other or they are fighting with each other they will think that is totally normal and I think it is the parent's work to guide them and say there is nothing wrong with you having the energy and you wanting to get rid of it or wrestle with each other but until the point that someone gets hurt, then it is NOT OK."

A few comments will help illustrate the kind of anecdotal evidence that consolidates the public concern about superhero toys and aggression. "For every child to some degree what they see whether its on TV or at home they mimic and they learn and they become until it becomes part of their typical self. "Many felt that their children imitated what they saw on TV taking on characters or repeating actions. A mother said simply "he would act it out-monkey see, monkey do". "he'll make sound effects or battle sounds as he plays with his toys". Others report stronger effects "The more he watches of the rough stuff its going to effect him and I would be concerned if all he wanted to watch was violence, I would probably have to take the TV away from him because he does get rough if he watches certain shows". One said her son "had an incredible memory" and "he could do the last half an hour of cartoons he had just seen he use to mimic the beast wars." In the same way, another mom reported her son "gets his bad guys and good guys' from TV and computer games".

We detected serious concerns about how and whether war toys help legitimize a culture of violence. And it was this internalization of the moral ideas communicated through TV programmes that worried them most. Janice Cohn (1996) has recently re-iterated how important it is for American parents to resist the media culture of violence, pointing out again how successive generations of super-hero toys continue to communicate very aggressive attitudes and values to children. In the light of recent school massacres,

once again "what and how toys communicate" about violence and aggression is becoming a central issue in the public discussion of "play media".

Studying War Toys and Games as Media

Anticipating the growing cultural appeal of play in the sixties, McLuhan 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." (pg. 210.) He goes on to say that "like our vernacular tongues, all games are media of interpersonal communication and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our immediate inner lives." Noticing their growing popularity in the mass media, McLuhan urges us to see aggressive games and sports "not just self-expression" of players but as "deeply and necessarily a means of interplay within an entire culture that is, as media that communicate specific cultural values and sentiments".

McLuhan was spot on. Games, sports, toys and video games are not only a media but rapidly becoming the paramount mass media sector in the entertainment economy. The last twenty years especially has witnessed the disproportionate growth of aggressive toys and games as a children's play media within the entertainment industries -- particularly with the growth of video gaming as the primary youth media. Yet in spite of thousands of studies of how television communicates about violence, there is very little research that examines the communication processes involved in this popular entertainment form — especially with regard to the onset of the preference for violent media products which begin with the first involvement with superhero warriors. It was the intention of this study to contribute to the the analysis of boys preferences for violent media (Goldstein 1998) by developing a way of analyzing how and what action toys communicate to young boys.

It is of course easy to theorize toys as mediated communication, and quite another thing to research communication thoughtfully -- especially considering the complexities of argument posed in the war toy debate. I believe that describing toys as "texts" is a useful but limited approach because "text" doesn't fully capture the complexity of this media nor the different ways kids assimilate a toy's meaning. Following McLuhan I want to understand toys as an "interplay" within a culture. Yet to do so we must clearly traverse the intellectual and methodological boundaries that exists between those who study the meanings as a cultural practice "designed in" by manufacturers and the meanings "constructed through" play in the transformative operations of active players. Following Stuart Hall (1980) I think it makes sense to see manufactured toys as mass communication occurring at the juncture between two fields of meaning making — the "encoded" meaning designed into them by the makers and marketers and the "decoded" meaning actively constructed by players as the toys meaning is transformed and re-aligned for imaginative play enactments.

To study this dual symbolic process I undertook a case study of Rescue Heroes. Recognizing the extent that aggressive and militaristic themes are well established in today's super-hero play cultures, Fisher Price decided to design a non-violent and pro-social line of "action toys" scripting the accessories, video

and marketing campaigns around more realistic rescue actions. This pro-social action toy line was marketed with a TV programme just before Christmas, providing an opportunity to study the impact of communicating pro-social play scripts to boys aged three to six. By controlling the mother and child's exposure to the promotional video material and prompting parental coaching we sought to isolate the roles that toy design, promotional material and parental support play in the child's acquisition and deployment of non-aggressive play patterns. The play behaviour of 30 subjects was observed before and after exposure to the rescue heroes movie in order to discover how boys 'decode' the 'pro-social' play scripts.

Communication by Design: Reading War Toys in the Context of Marketing

To the media analyst, both the encoding and decoding moments are important -- and researchable, though not by similar means. As models of our world, all toys are consciously designed as symbols — they point in some intentional way to the known social world — a car, train, doll, or monopoly game — like all models refer to specific worldly events, situations, objects or processes. The toy car for example, in so far as it is designed to be a 'car' conveys some very basic ideas about the modalities of modern transportation to the child, and if it is self propelling sports car, also the values our society imbues in this technology — speed, daring, danger, individuality, excitement etc. It is important therefore for the researcher to inquire of the toy designer what and why they designed the model as they did - their projected purpose and use of the toy — the choice of colours and features. I think it is important for the toy research community for greater dialogue between designers and researchers but it is also possible to decipher their designs, plans and strategies by other means. Action toys are clearly designed with implicit values and play styles in mind too — for example the changes in body musculature the differentiates the contemporary action hero from earlier versions, the costume and colouring, their size and motility, and whether they can stand on their own. But character toys are also designed with media synergies in mind too (Kinder 1991).

Star Wars Lego reminds us that even modernist toys are rarely designed as simple stand-alone models of objects-in-the real world any longer — but as references to a mediated fantasy communicated in other media. McLuhan once explained that in the electronic era, media analysis is best served by "studying media as environments". I have interpreted this to mean, that if the 'medium is the massage' then the message of postmodern toys is synergistic communication. Others call it intertextuality, yet promotional toys especially have no simple correspondence with objects in the real world, but are objectified crystallization's of fictional fields — scripted to refer to mythic worlds-in-conflict. (Kinder 1993) To understand an action toy's meaning requires a "reading" the whole attitudinal field that surrounds them — like a G.I Joe ad I still remember the started with the Cobra commando dialogue "nice village" yah. Lets use it for target practice". As children's culture researchers we should be aware that in the contemporary marketplace, toy design and marketing has itself become a multi-layered communication activity making it harder to think simplistically about toys as isolated signs and communication as a straight forward reading of the toy as text.

The design of the commercial toy can be broken down into three fields of encoding: preferences, social representation, and play values. Elaborate model. Fig.

Such ads remind us that these action toy lines are not only designed to refer to a soldier's role (i.e. G.I. Joe), but to a character, their deeds, friends, to struggles of good and evil, battle tactics and events, weapons, equipment and feelings associated with violent confrontations staged in a symbolic universe. Anyone who has talked to North American children recently about toys, knows that this idea of a 'synergistic system of references' is not a high-flying ideological theorization, but a matter of everyday interest to young boys. Children watch television avidly to learn about the world of toys, and to understand the possibility of using them in play. They watch commercials to see what's cool and the talk to each other about their favourite toys. It is important therefore to make sense of this narrative dimension of action toy design because these references are relevant to kids conception and use of the toys. Yet we know almost nothing about how young viewers read — that is make sense of -- this promotional dialogue and use this knowledge in their play? It is from our dialogues with them, that I assert the premise of this study, we cannot comprehend how action toys communicate to children without understanding first what the film or TV series and ads communicate about that toy's meaning to them.

Most of our subjects were very interested in television series and toy advertising — they watch it to decide what is cool and how to use toys. We found that by age three most boys do understand the connection between the toy's character and TV character. The boys who saw the programme and ad were excited -- perhaps it was so they could compare the toy with the real thing on TV and interested in watching other boys play with Rescue Hero toys. Occasionally they played with the Rescue Heroes sitting on the table while watching TV; one fidgeted restlessly until he climbed across the table to take the demonstration Rescue Hero figure to hold, and then continued to watch. Another instructed his play partner to manipulate his Rescue Heroes when he saw them on the TV screen. It was sort of a game that connected the toy with the show. Other boys pointed out the toys on the table when the characters are introduced by name. Some boys continuously held the Rescue Heroes and they seemed to be playing with them subconsciously while simultaneously watching the video. But how do children understand these moral attitudes inscribed into the action hero narratives?

Modes of Decoding the Toy

To play racing with a 'toy car', presumes extensive cultural knowledge — of vehicles and their various uses, contests, etc.-- on the part of the decoder. In the same way, we were interested in what knowledge children apply to make sense of the implicit "pro-social" roles and moral orientation scripted into the Rescue Heroes and how they used these concepts in their play. How well do kids comprehend the complexity of an action toy's narrative references if at all — the moral orientation, the roles, motives, skills, and moral dilemmas that are being communicated about by these toys? And how do they deploy their knowledge about the toys meaning in their play?

To take account of the cultural assumptions that the child brings to the toy — that is how the designed meaning is assimilated into their stock of cultural knowledge, and how that knowledge is mobilized in play we observed how the kids responded to the array of toys on the shelf. Toys communicate through

their design (colour, faces, costumes, accessories etc). Much of the cognitive activity with new toys seems to be dedicated to figuring out what the toy is — what manner of toy, what it represents and how it groups with other toys. Exploring and arraying the toys seems to be related to the structured interpretations these players are making. In getting to know a toy — looking and touching-- is clearly a first step toward imaginative play. It takes a bit of time manipulating an action toy before the boys feel they have assessed it. In the preliminary session we noted the absence of more complex dyadic social interaction or fantasy play -- and although it varied with age of the child and their familiarity. Since many of the boys didn't know each other this is understandable. But we note that only after showing the video and introducing the Rescue Hero toys which establishes a common knowledge of these toys, that we got to see much collaborative play or complex multi-toy scenarios. Common knowledge about the toys roles and performatives seem to be a pre-requisite of the negotiated collaborative play scenes so often depicted in the superhero toy ads and the energy that accompanies play.

As totally new toys, the brightly coloured if over-sized Rescue Heroes complete with action accessories, were often chosen even in preference to well known favourites like Batman and Tendril. Each toy was inspected and manipulated carefully. Most of the 'play' that we observed during the first session therefore was 'solitary' -- the boys often spent from 30 seconds to up to five minutes examining, manipulating and arraying their action toys on their own as a prelude or build up to the physical confrontation or crashing, hitting, throwing or banging. Many boys created line ups and collections of their toys, assembling them into small clusters of toys that go together. It is customary to call these exploratory behaviours 'play', but from our observations and conversations, play of this kind involves a strong element of 'active interpretation'.

We used the parallel play time however, to talk to the boys about the toys meaning, their groupings and to ask them about their preferred play activities. There are two dimensions to this process that we observed — becoming interested in the toy, figuring out what kind of toy it is — and discovering the toy's "performatives" — what it can do. Of Gil one boy says: "He's a scuba diver, he has fins, this is his tank, and this is a thing to collect treasure". Of Jack he says he's "a workerman". Again of Gil: "He's a scuba diver...He dives...in the water". The boys were interested in making sense of what the toy was and yet each identity assumed some correspondence between the real world and the play world — although not necessarily a direct correspondence. In many cases the reference to what the toy was blended the fantasy worlds of TV and the social world of school, family and city. The mediated environment is part of everyday life for these boys.

From these conversations too, we concluded that especially among older boys, their play is cued more from their reading of the toys 'design-for-action' rather than its 'design-as-role'. A toy revealed what you were supposed "to do" with it through these initial explorations of how it moved and what equipment it used. When they take out a toy truck they will look for something to carry, or when they take out Lego they will construct a vehicle or a weapon; when they take out a board game like Operation they want the other child to come and take turns playing with them. The boys were obviously attracted to the movable equipment that accompanies each rescue hero — especially Billy Blazes axe and Rocky's grappling hook. It was no mystery why. These accessories were clearly interpreted as weapons. In this sense the child's primary reading of the Rescue Heroes toys are 'performative' rather than 'denotative'.

Since these performatives are grounded in very complex attitudes and values which legitimize and privilege certain kinds of social actions in certain situations, we sought to analyze how these scripts were expressed in the play actions of the child. Our research revealed, as might be expected, that the pro-social backstory scripts are not always understood, interpreted or employed by the young player in the way they are designed into the toy itself. We notice for instance that based on its design, Billy's fireman's axe was used most frequently as a weapon to attack an enemy; or Rocky's grappling catapult used as a gun to shoot other toys. As in all acts of decoding, such ambiguous readings cannot be written off as 'errant' or inadequate comprehension of the toy's design -- first, because the toys meaning must be assimilated into pre-existing routines for play and second because an action toy is not a single idea but a complex morality tale whose pretext must be understood. Without knowing the backstory, these rescue toys are like any other action toy.

We observed however, that the process of decoding a toy's 'design' implies several different processes of interpretation. All toys invoke the special set of assumptions about their use that we call play -- a unique modality of decoding that is both interpretive and expressive. Toys seem to ask questions: What can I do with this object? What kind of toy is it? How can we play with it? What are the modes for self expression it offers me? To the child, toys are possibilities — incomplete sentences that need completion. But this possibility of play must be read into the toy. All 'toys' are not only texts then, but play media that also enable the player to communicate directly their own interpretation for 'use' in the social construction of play. The act of self expression is therefore based on an implicit reading of the toy's performative as well as the situation in which the player finds themselves.

How did the child understand the performatives of action toys? A few things did become clear to us, although much remains to be discovered about the underlying cognitive processes of "decoding". Only a few of our subjects found the range of toys we provided of little interest, and only one was not interested in playing with toys at all. Firstly young Canadian boys are aficionado's of toys, and most of them have by age three have developed a deep interest in playing with action toys or "superheroes". When placed in a play room with a wide range toys available, they chose to play mostly with action toys—and in rather routine way. When they take an action figure like Batman or Tendril after a brief moment of examining and manipulating most boys then find something or some one to attack. "Superheroes" means the world is divided into good and evil and confrontations are inevitable. The attacks happen with various degrees of intensity and may or may not include actual contact. Sometimes the toys are just smashed together; sometimes they are knocked over or thrown; voices and noises often accompany the conflicts. In the same way, in spite of their different costumes and accessories intended to communicate their roles in the rescue team, most boys regarded and used Rescue Heroes as action toys. Rescue heroes were manipulated, crashed and thrown about just like other "superhero toys". Is this surprising? Not really. Because who they are is less important than what they can do.

We did notice that before engaging in staging confrontations, subjects would separate the action toys into groups or teams of 'good or bad' characters. We spent a lot of time asking about the ideas behind their groupings of toys (implicit Q-sort) to help us understand what kinds of toys can be "played together". Different criteria were used to determine the characters demeanor and position in the conflict — what we

called their moral orientation. Play narratives require the application of moral judgements. Whether it be colour, "all the bad guys have red" or their physical appearances "his face looks mean" or "his face looks good", the boys always had a ready reason for distinguishing good from bad. But in each case there was an implicit moral orientation. The good vs. bad classification plays a role in superhero play, beyond that of other toy objects such as vehicles or games. Superhero toys subsume a values concept, in part because they are social, but this judgement goes beyond the like/dislike dichotomy of for example Barbie dolls. In many cases these judgements are based on the assumed division of the social world into teams of good and bad characters. Superhero play frequently involves an exercise of moral judgment — in one case eliciting a play dialogue that extended to the existence of God.

Rescue Hero toys are quickly assimilated into the superhero play mode because they are designed as action heroes (Brougere 1998). The similarity of their equipment to weapons (axe, hammer, hook etc.) ensured that Rescue Hero figures were identified as 'action figures' by most boys -- a fact that was confirmed by repeated deployment of the Rescue Heroes in typical battle and fighting confrontation scenarios. Equipment was indeed the primary cue in these interpretations of design-for-action. Gil "A bad guy, cause he has claws" and Billy "He's a fire man with an axe.. he can kill someone". Similarly the boys respond to our inquiries about what the toys can do "this guys job is to protect people (Billy)...and this guy rescues by shooting this thing out of his gun (Rocky)" As far as the boys were concerned, even before learning their backstory, Rescue Heroes were interesting because they could be assimilated into the routine patterns of action play — confrontation, rescue and battle. On example, Fisher Price designed the feet on their rescue heroes to be different -- so unlike other action toys they could stand on their own. I missed the importance of this for staging action scenes and combats until I talked to one of the subjects who was busy testing the strength of Rocky's axe mechanism by seeing if it could knock Gil off his balance point. Rocky has in fact been redesigned with a hose.

But there is another important aspect of the boys' interpretation of Rescue Heroes within the genre 'action toy'. A dialogue is part of action play. Superheroes is an 'enacted' event — a staging of imagined social narratives and interactions between imaginary characters. We witness both the characters and the narrators voices used to express the players thoughts and feelings during these stagings — the characters voice indicates a degree of identification (the projection of imaginary subjectivity) while the narrators voice implies a directorial role (the player using the characters as props in the staging of a larger drama). We often judge these articulations as "pretend play" — seeing it as proof of a break between the flow of meaning from the adult world to the child's. This enacted expressiveness in superhero play is often regarded by play theorists as the 'transcendent' moment of pretending -- but in this study we witnessed more ritualization than creativity. Pretending is not always evidence of creative expression, but often merely the application of the routine interpretations of the mythic world of superheroes to the basic play scripts associated with the toys.

Cueing Rescue Scenes

After the first session the boys were gathered with their mothers around a table to be introduced to the Rescue Hero line and to watch a video. The introduction was carefully prepared to provide the basic information about the scripting of the toy including the characters name, rescue role, equipment and what

it can do, and a typical rescue scene involving that toy. The control group then watched a Bugs Bunny cartoon, while the other two groups watched the ad and video for Rescue Heroes. Most of the boys watched the ad and video with interest. The boys seemed excited and interested to hear about the Rescue Hero toys they had just played with.

The video seems fairly effective in conveying the basic constellation of names, traits, equipment use, rescue role that defines the Rescue Hero Universe. We observed that knowledge of rescue roles and helping orientation of these characters was more evident after the video, and especially after one week. The more frequently the children watched the more they could remember the toys names, what the equipment was for and their typical rescue roles. Watching TV helped the boys establish both an interest in these toys, and a depth of knowledge about these characters.

We used a more systematic accounting of the aggressive and prosocial play behaviours, both before and after viewing, as well as a week later through an in-home interview in order to summarize the consequences of our manipulations. The data revealed three things of note: Firstly the act of watching TV seemed to energize the play in all conditions resulting in more pro-social and aggressive actions and narratives being undertaken (see Fig # 1-6). Secondly, the boys that were exposed to the Rescue Heroes video did show a significantly greater propensity to include pro-social scenarios in their play after the video, even if it was to rescue a character before killing another (see Fig. # 7-9). Thirdly, the mothers that got most involved in coaching the children, reported more observations of pro-social effects than controls and moderates.

We were surprised to find however, that a simple demonstration of the toy could also be effective in conveying the toys roles and actions to the children which speaks to the potential of parental guidance and intervention. Even in the control group, some boys were able to identify the names of the Rescue Hero toys, and their roles as firefighter or scuba diver. A few also incorporated this knowledge into their play based on some of their features and equipment, or in one case their moral alignment as rescuing heroes. One boy was also intrigued by the hook: he kept using the grappling hook by throwing it out and then telling either the other boy or the interviewer to hold on to it while he wound it back in. He was pleased by his clever use of Rocky's equipment to "help" people. He had acquired a new play script. After the play session was over he took his Rocky and Billy, to show his Dad who was waiting outside the room and asked his Dad to save him using Rocky's grappling hook.

Did seeing the Rescue Heroes programme and ads accentuate the pro-social elements in the boys play? We did see instances of very positive impacts: Firstly, a few children who were initially dis-interested in action toys then incorporated rescue hero themes by imitating the movie scenes with the Rescue Hero toys. Neither boy used the Rescue Heroes to rescue anyone before the video but after they developed elaborate rescue scenes for the majority of the second half of the play session. Another pair grabbed a chair in the play room and placed different characters on top of it and took turns rescuing them.

Subject -"How about that guy he needs to get rescued (Gil), but I rescued him"

Subject -"(Holding onto Gil on the chair) Help I need rescuing. Shoot up here and I'll grab that (Rocky's hook)"

Subject -"anyway it got caught and I pulled it back (Hook)"

Later in the week one of these boys continued playing rescue scenes and he built a block house he used in his fireman rescue scenario repeatedly (as shown in the video).

Secondly, several boys who initially preferred playing combat action games began to integrate Rescue Hero characters, abilities and traits into their action play scripts because having the backstory seemed to make the negotiation of coordinated character based rescue scenes familiar. Having grasped the rescue roles and equipment they began to use them in more elaborate play scenarios with other toys After the video however social play generally increased, and narratives were somewhat complexified. A number of boys made their Rescue Heroes fight and save people but also used other action figures such as Spiderman to do the same after negotiation.

S: How is he going to rescue him?

S: He's going to go in the water, he's going to go in the water and this can make him swim really fast. (use Billy to save Jack. He said that Billy's axe would help him swim really fast) No more Rescue Heroes for you... (He says this while holding the Batman character). Their going to fight. (He has the Batman character and Billy)

Interviewer-So why do they want to fight?

Subject -Cause this guy put this guy in the water. (*The Batman character put Jack in the water*). This is how he's going to kill him. (*he takes Billy in one hand and the Batman character in the other and uses Billy's ax to chop the Batman character in the face*).

Given the differences in play style and family orientation it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about how seeing the video effects the boys imaginative play. The most prevalent consequence was that the boys assimilated the rescue thematic into their usual action toy play — some consciously using them out of character (one made Gil fight the Batman character because Gil did "not like what the Batman guy was doing") Another subjects decided on aggressive narratives which included the Rescue Hero:

S "Yah, jack hammer, (in a singing voice) Lets kill the Rescue Heroes. (He says this as he uses Billy's axe to chop the Batman character). (He then puts Jack Hammer in the water

Still others came to the conclusion that although they were rescuers they could "fight bad guys" (maintaining their moral orientation but misreading their role). Another boy who understood their roles still preferred to play fight with them but he developed teams of Rescue Heroes to fight the other boys teams. Another boy elaborated when asked "who would the RH fight".

Subject x -"Bad guys and this guy is the only guy (Rocky) who could shoot and this guy (Billy) could fight cause this guy has sort of a thing that could capture bad guys (Rocky's grappling hook) and this guy has an ax that can chop (Billy).

Interviewer-So what is this used for, for killing people? (point to Billy's axe).

Subject -Yah and to knock down buildings, its when bad people are looking in. First the rescue people take all the good people out and when the bad guys attack them, then they chop the building down and the bad guys die."

Although we saw the boys concentrating on which toys could play with and against each other, we saw less of the evidence of the boys playing together with their toys. In social play toys, words and actions combine to give shape to the child's ideas. Most of the parents we talked to valued play because it is creative, social and imaginative. From invocations to pretend, to negotiations around the nature of play, its rules to words and actions expressed from within the staged world, play's communication is robust and unlike any other communication activity. Toys not only communicate to children but children communicate to others through and about their toys. An important aspect of any toy then is its ability to construct play as a "social occasion" — a toys potential to coordinate activity with another player. Although we saw the boys use their toys to interact with other toys (sometimes hitting or grabbing toys in the possession of another player) we saw fewer attempts to define the situation as coordinated fantasy play. And in this respect there was not strong evidence that knowing more about the prosocial scripts enabled these boys to construct more coordinated fantasy play.

Most social play episodes are initialized by a verbal statement such as "lets pretend" — or some other form of social communication takes place that brings the actual players together in agreement to interact according to the rules. We can further distinguish two kinds of interactions that take place in the negotiations between players —dialogue about the game and dialogue in it. In social play dialogues about how to structure the game, the debates about the assumptions and rules can be complex or simply shouted instructions. But what are the rules of imaginary play? Playing a board game in which the rules were known and pre-defined seem to be the easiest form of play to negotiate. Action toy play being well established is also possible. Social pretending with unknown pro-social toys like the Rescue Heroes, proved difficult perhaps because of the lack of common knowledge about how you play prosocial play scripts. The common observation of the video helps establish this common understanding but more seems to be necessary. It is worth noting that the mothers in the "hands on" condition were the ones that noted conversations between siblings and friends where their child had to explain the premise of this prosocial scripting to others.

Conclusion

Although TV is an ambiguous communicator of values (RosenKoetter et al 1990) one commonly reported effect of watching TV is that it influences play. TV seems to have both the capacity to stimulate and energize and to consolidate scripts for aggressive confrontation with toys (Kline 1999). Many mothers reported that their children imitated what they saw on TV—and they were concerned. "For every child to some degree what they see whether its on TV or at home they mimic and they learn and they become until it becomes part of their typical self." Another stated: "we were watching Spiderman and Batman and we found we were planning our day around (it was the old Batman) and we found we had to cut it out because there was a lot of punching and kicking and X started picking up on it and going 'pow' and things like that, so we had to cut it out". We agree with previous researchers that to some degree these observations are grounded in the synergistic communication of toys and TV (Alexander et al. 1995, Greenfield et. al 1990, Weiss et al 1992). But we also noted that mothers who were involved in coaching their children to pay attention to the rescue themes, did report more pro-social behaviour in their boys indicating that family life is an important mediating variable in the socialization of aggression (Singers 1983, Korzenny 1981).

Popular toys predominate in children's construction of their play culture, in part we suspect because TV establishes a field of common interest and knowledge (Pekora 1995). Action toys particularly provide the ready vocabulary of play for many of Canadian boys who exhibit rather extensive mapping of the "superhero universe". Routine imaginary combats between good guys and bad guys are deeply entrenched in boy culture. Our research on Rescue Heroes has confirmed that most boys have learned the patterns of "superhero" play very well by age four, and one shouldn't expect one "pro-social" toy script to radically alter this way of decoding toys or constructing play as a social occasion. But for those interested in encouraging pro-social play scripts, the Rescue Heroes did inspire some incorporation of rescue scenes into their play and promote some negotiation of this rescue thematic in social play.

We should never underestimate the power of the word "toy". The toys potential for play is both created through play action, but also in some sense pre-exists in their play culture. To become a player each must be able to 'read' the "potential and qualities of the play" latent in their toys and to 'negotiate' this knowledge with their peers. When one child says to another "lets play" it is an invitation to engage in social communication with each other by using toys. But a very complex process of meaning-making underlies even the simplest acts of playfulness. A wealth of social concepts is employed regularly in playing with action toys — because play implies the active application of rules, roles, narrative structures that the player brings to the game to make play. Yet we also observe that these complex symbolics are embedded with values and moral divisions that also get applied in play. It is this moral communication of toys that lies at the heart of the war play debate.

Both parents and media play a role in communicating the "protocols of play" to children. However strongly felt their concern, many mothers in our study were reluctant to enforce strict controls on their boys, especially the older ones. A typical explanation of this parental dilemma was: "I got him a Spiderman that shoots out missiles and stuff. But I always try to tell him don't aim at people or animals. But I got it for him because I always have this thing in my mind, I don't want to take him too much away from boys toys because then, I don't really want to pay attention to all these controversial messages I get from society, but I don't want him to miss out on anything. Especially I don't want to say you can't have

that because then of course he will want it." But our study suggests that toys communicate on many levels — and one of the most important ones is moral. The action toy especially seems to engage children in a judgement of values. We suspect that in adopting this "hands off" attitude these mothers are missing an important opportunity for communicating with their children about their own moral positions.

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