Toys as media: young males (3-6) acquisition of pro-social play scripts for Rescue Hero action toys

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Background

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 'pro-social' 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 & Levine, 1987). Benjamin Singer's study had documented the influence of TV programmes on children's imaginative 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; 1994). 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, 1986) 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. (1990) 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 very old play media, which refer paradoxically to 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 & Jukes, 1993). As Wegener-Spöhring (1994) 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. (Humphries & Smith, 1987). Super-hero play among young boys doesn't always take the form of meaningless ritualized aggression either, but has elements of complex social negotiation (Brougère, 1987) and story telling (Mouritsen, 1997).

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 (1997). 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. Sutton-Smith defines play as paradoxical and ambiguous form of communication. 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, which both transmits ideology and yet demands active interpretation.

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 colored if over-sized Rescue Heroes complete with action accessories, were often chosen even in preference to well-known favorites 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 playtime 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 worker man". 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 it's '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 players find 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 playroom 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 judgment goes beyond the like/dislike dichotomy of for example Barbie dolls. In many cases these judgments 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 (Brougère, 1996). 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 fireman 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.

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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 pro-social 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 undertake. 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. 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 program 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 playroom 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 blockhouse 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.

Subject: How is he going to rescue him?
Subject: 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).* They're 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 subject decided on aggressive narratives which included the Rescue Hero:

> *Subject*: 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*: 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 pro-social 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 pro-social 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 pro-social 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 in our study reported that their children imitated what they saw on TV—and they were concerned. "For every child to some degree what they see, whether it's 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 (Korzenny, 1981; Singers, 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.

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