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Representing Violence, Playing Control: Warring Constructions of Masculinity in Action Man Toys

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This chapter analyses how children, and especially boys, are constructed as 'savage' in relation to warlike toys and representations that narrate particular versions of conflict, such as war and terrorism. The chapter uses Action Man toys as a case study that is contextualized against a wider background of other toys, television programmes and films. Action Man is most familiar as a twelve-inch costumed toy figure, but the brand also extends into related media representations such as television programmes, comics and advertising. The chapter focuses increasingly on the specifics of Action Man representations produced from the 1960s to the 1990s, prefacing this detailed discussion with some examples of transmedia texts aimed at children in film and television. While critical work on screen media for children has developed sophisticated analytical tools, this chapter suggests that making the toy a central object of analysis allows for insights into representations of the gendered body that are particularly useful for work on the child-savage analogy. Some of the cultural meanings of war toys, warlike play and representations of war that can be analysed from this perspective include their role in the construction of masculine identity, their representation of particular wars and warlikeness in general, and their relationship to consumer society.[1] This complex of meanings exhibits many of the contradictions that inhabit the construction of 'the child' in general, set out in the introduction to this volume. These meanings include what is savage and unruly, but also an emphasis on rules and hierarchy. The often extreme masculinity of war toys and games is countered by an aesthetic of spatial disposition, collecting and sometimes nurturing that is more conventionally feminine. Such inter-dependent but apparently opposed meanings can also be seen in the construction of the child as untainted by adult corruption yet also savage, or as in need of adult guidance yet also offering a model of innocence and purity that adults are expected to admire. Children, and especially boys, are constructed as 'savage' in relation to warlike toys and representations.

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[1] See Jonathan Bignell, 'The Meanings of War Toys and War Games', in Ian Stewart and Susan Carruthers (eds), *War Culture and the Media: Representations of the Military in 20th Century Britain* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996), 165-184.

The term 'savage' initially meant that which was untamed and uncivilised, referring to both physical landscapes and also to people inhabiting them. The extension of the term into the realm of culture and manners denoted behaviour that was cruel, violent and ungoverned. It is these related meanings that pit the savage against the cultivated, civilised and controlled that are explored in this paper in relation to films, toys and other texts made by adults for children. These toys and representations are also the subjects of narratives: adults tell stories about what it means to be a child by referring to play, toys and representations that construct the child who engages with them. So it is necessary to conduct analyses of how objects and representations contribute to the ideologies that adults offer to children, since adults construct narratives about children and their toys, play and entertainment activities as Lincoln Geraghty has argued in relation to science-fictional texts.[2] These narratives construct what childhood is, and at the same time they construct the boundaries separating the savage from the civilised. Performance and performativity play an important role here, since the multimedial embedding of war toys in a range of narratives from films to comics to television advertisements convey scripts to children, proposing ways of playing with these toys. The narratives enveloping toys and play construct versions of masculinity that discipline the parameters of fantasy.

Toys and their diverse media representations propagate warring definitions of masculinity. In my discussion below of the Action Man toy brand, masculinity is represented through familiar cultural tropes or scripts that focus on physical force, the ability to use violence, strength, and physical prowess that is displayed in hand-to-hand combat. At the same time, masculinity is also represented as the exercise of rationality and control, especially through the deployment of technology. These two predominant modes are explored in this chapter as aspects that are 'at play' in the complexities of the representations that are discussed here, and which are also available in the uses of toys and texts that actual children might develop for them. The kinds of play that actual children engage in are not the topic of this chapter, but instead the example of Action Man is used to demonstrate that a discursive struggle takes place around him. Rather than reading off unitary meanings of films, toys or comics, the chapter unpacks the diversity of ways in which masculinity is figured and shows how strategies of control attempt to frame the meanings of toys, films, comics

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[2] Lincoln Geraghty, 'Drawn to Television', *Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television* 3:2 (2010), 287-300.

and other media texts. These strategies of control at a textual level mirror the tension within the representations between masculinity as excessive, violent and disordered on the one hand, and contained, rational and ordered on the other hand. The movement of texts, brands and narrative tropes across media in the contemporary world places pressure on such strategies of control, where the extension and differentiation of the Action Man toy brand require the exploitation of signification in multiple ways yet also demand degrees of containment and coherence.

These analytical approaches to the dynamic processes of constructing the meanings of a toy brand are methodologically similar to those adopted in critical discourses about many contemporary media ensembles. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin influentially developed the concept of remediation to address the mobilisation of several different media platforms, audiences and cultural practices to expand a text's narrative or story-world over those platforms as an economic and ideological principle.[3] For instance, the Star Wars franchise is well-known example of remediation that, like Action Man, impacts on the representation of war and violence. *Star Wars* has claims to be the first megapicture or super-blockbuster film, as Scott Bukatman and Tom Shone, among others, have argued, and much of *Star Wars*' cultural impact and financial profit came from associated products.[4] Its props, characters and narrative forms are 'toyetic'; a good basis for toys including action figures, models, games, comics and further film and television products. Toy licensing from the 1977 film was worth $500 million for the Hasbro and Galoob companies who manufactured the toys, and according to Graham Dawson the franchises to associate products (such as tee-shirts, lunchboxes and pyjamas) with its characters were worth $1.5 billion per year.[5] *Star Wars* offers its audiences multiple ways to make sense of its narrative, which include references to fairytales, to epic conflicts between an evil Empire and freedom-loving Rebels, and to the cinema

[3] Jay D. Bolter and Roger Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
[4] Scott Bukatman, 'Zooming Out: The End of Offscreen Space, in J. Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 248-272. Tom Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004).
[5] Graham Dawson, 'War Toys', in Gary Day (ed.), *Readings in Popular Culture: Trivial Pursuits?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 104-105.

serials of the 1930s.[6] In his landmark account of postmodern textuality in cinema, Fredric Jameson called *Star Wars* a 'nostalgia film' because it deploys conventions, motifs and clichés deriving from different historical periods and media, but displaces them from their contexts and collapses them together.[7] *Star Wars*' references to popular culture include the Western, especially *The Searchers* where the hero must leave his home to rescue a woman captured by the Indians,[8] and the film is also a sea adventure where outlaw pirates use trickery and courage to defeat naval authority. *Star Wars* is also a medieval quest, with the Jedi Knights defending a legacy of mystical and chivalric values against its perversion in the service of the Empire,[9] and a comedy film centring on the adventures of a duo of 'little guys', the robots C3PO and R2D2 who wrangle at the edges of the epic story. It is a Cold War thriller dramatising the struggle of the Rebel Alliance against the evil Empire, and a Second World War film with aerial dogfighting and a commando raid against the Death Star. It draws on the positive connotations of rebellion that have been used to underpin myths about the founding of the USA and the US's support for other freedom-fighters around the world. But it is also a postmodern story about the creative and liberating possibilities for open-minded alliances that look to the future, bringing different races and cultures together.[10] In relation to constructions of childhood, the key narrative trope in *Star* Wars is a coming-of-age story where Luke Skywalker leaves his rural home to grow up and realise his true identity. This structure is a means to express but also to contain the narrative's ambivalence about the home to which Luke cannot return, his implication in violence and his close association with his antagonist Darth

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[6] For an account of how the multiple tropes and allusions mentioned here operate in the context of the film's opening moments, see Jonathan Bignell, '*Star Wars* (1977): Back and forth in time and space' in James Walters and Tom Brown (eds), *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory* (London: BFI, 2010), 111-115.

[7] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146 (1984), 53-92.

[8] The generic association with Westerns is analysed in Douglas Pye, 'Writing and Reputation: *The Searchers*, 1956-1976', in Jonathan Bignell (ed.), *Writing and Cinema* (Harlow: Longman, 1999), 206.

[9] The medievalism of *Star Wars* is noted in David Williams, 'Medieval Movies', *Yearbook of English Studies* 20 (1990), 1-32.

[10] The ambivalence of *Star Wars*' postmodern politics is debated by Will Brooker, 'New Hope: The postmodern project of *Star Wars*', in Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (eds), *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video* (London: Arnold 1997), 101-112.

Vader. In the 1977 film and its sequels, scripts for play and for toy collecting place the maturation of the male adolescent in the centre of their epic war narratives.

In the current culture of media convergence, digital production, exhibition and consumption permit texts and users to migrate from screen to screen, so that what Henry Jenkins has called 'participation culture' is now common. Jenkins is keen to point out that this is not a monolithic and teleological process, for it is marked by 'tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most of all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes'.[11] Remediation is one aspect of this unpredictability. Some commentators, such as Thomas Schatz discussing spectacle in recent cinema, regrets that films lose narrative complexity and become increasingly 'plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic and fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly "fantastic" (and thus, apolitical), and increasingly targeted at younger audiences.'[12] But it is more accurate to argue that narrativisation is characterised by what Paul Lunenfeld calls the 'sheer plenitude of narrative, exemplified by the glowingly accessible archive of everything.'[13] The textual material in secondary markets such as toys, posters and comics can be seen as 'paratexts' as these are defined by Gerard Genette; they circulate around the threshold of the textual object and form part of a culture of collecting as well as interpreting, where narratives evolve through remediation.[14] For example, as Neil Perryman has shown,[15] the *Doctor Who* television series brand was first remediated by adult fan writers and licensees of audio recordings (Virgin, Big Finish, Cosgrove Hall), and then by the BBC's digital development team who wanted to create a complex narrative across the episodes of the new 2005 television series. The narrative ran across television episodes, online 'webisodes', teasers for mobile phones ('mobisodes') and websites that may often look like unofficial fan productions

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[11] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London: New York University Press, 2006), 11.
[12] Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1993), 23.
[13] Paul Lunenfeld, 'The Myths of Interactive Cinema' in Dan Harries (ed.), *The New Media Book* (2nd ed.) (London: BFI, 2004), 151.
[14] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[15] Neil Perryman, '*Doctor Who* and the Convergence of Media', in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (4th ed.) (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009).

but are actually BBC properties. Such remediation creates a larger story-world, developing characters more fully across multiple convergent media. As a popular programme aimed at child audiences, the BBC's *Doctor Who* was a site where adults within and outside the agencies creating and managing its meanings were engaged in a dynamic remediation process. The war toys discussed in the remainder of this chapter demonstrate how brands, characters and narratives extend cultural scripts relating to masculinity, war and violence while also constraining them within the parameters that construct how the child and the savage can make sense.

War Toys and War Games

But what counts as a war toy or a war game is less easy to define than might first appear. There are toy guns, soldiers, military vehicles, aeroplanes and so on, together with the games that can be played with them. But only some of these toys are representations of actual war equipment or armies, either in the past or the present. Most contemporary war toys are based on television fiction or cinema narratives, like the ranges of toys related to science-fiction film, though some of these narratives are themselves mediations of actual wars, especially the Second World War and recent Gulf conflicts. Similarly, late 19th century war toys, like the Britains range of toy soldiers made of lead, were based on the imperial military projects that were the basis of many children's adventure fictions that constructed masculinities for children.[16] Although the science fiction texts and their toy spin-offs are set in a fictional future, they are based upon a conflict between the familiar (contemporary characters, equipment and behaviour) and the unfamiliar (alien races, equipment and behaviour). War scenarios are firmly set within a moral structure which values loyalty, altruism, competence and heterosexuality.

     In terms of the representation of war, these 'realistic' and fictional war game scenarios share a number of characteristics. They have a delimited geographical terrain, whether a Second World War battlefield or an imagined alien landscape. In games played with model vehicles and/or figures, and in computer games, there are elaborate rules that define possible actions. These rules specify the characteristics of the combatants' equipment (in speed, strength of armour, ammunition available etc.),

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[16] See Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994) for an account of this long and important history of military masculinities.

and determine how success or failure is evaluated. War appears to be a rule-governed and rational activity, in which chance, politics, and morality play a minor role, and this corresponds to one of the major conceptualisations of actual war in contemporary culture. War games are about the calculated management of risk, and the competent deployment of technological resources. War games implicitly value particular attributes, which include the ability to plan strategically, to balance risk against benefit, to quantify potentials, to follow detailed procedures, and to attain victory by effective management of resources. War games share in the contemporary ideological representation of the military (in recruitment advertising, for instance) as professionalised and technological. Play offers an arena for negotiating between versions of identity. Games allow the player some autonomy of action and the sanctioning of experiments in positive or negative behaviour, but are bounded in time and space and bounded by rules.

Even in the early 1960s, research on children's and adults' games by Roberts and Sutton-Smith suggested that games of strategy and combat were prevalent in the developed West (and not in the developing world) because these societies train children in obedience and independence in the context of a highly stratified and competitive culture.[17] The research argued that demands for the child's obedience to elaborate rules and social conventions are pressing, and the frustration experienced as a result of this is expressed in unreal combat. This is a uses-and-gratifications model, in which war games model reality but because the game is bounded by knowable rules, delimited in time and space, and provides a system for defining and attaining success, it is both comprehensible and satisfying where the world beyond the game may not be. Despite the apparent savagery of games at a representational level, at a performative level they are most pleasurable when highly organised and rational.

There are still toy soldiers, guns, model kits and wargames deriving from the Second World War, but comparatively few from earlier wars. This is probably because of the fetishisation of technology in toys in general, and in war toys in particular. Toys representing technological equipment (like helicopters or tanks) and technological toys (like sound-generating guns or computer games) comprise the majority of toys marketed to boys. But there are few toys or games relating to the Vietnam War or the Falklands War, for instance, although these offer opportunities

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[17] Brian Sutton-Smith, *et al.*, 'Game Involvement in Adults', *Journal of Social Psychology* 60 (1963), 15-30.

for the production of technological toys. In Britain at least, these wars have lost
cultural visibility because of their political sensitivity in comparison to the apparently
more clear-cut issues involved in the first Gulf War and the Second World War.
There are toy weapons, computer games and model vehicles and aircraft representing
aspects of the first Gulf War, and interestingly some representing the United Nations
Peacekeeping Force. In each case of the toy figures representing combatants in actual
wars, there is a greater variety of different infantrymen, tanks, aeroplanes, etc. on the
victorious Western or Allied side than on the opponents'. Package illustrations
suggest a way of playing with the figures in which a static diorama is constructed or a
simple wargame is devised. Unlike the case of Action Man, physical play is difficult
with small static figures, and there is no central character in the fictional scenario.
However, such figure sets represent war similarly, as active, challenging and
masculine. Figures representing ceremonial uniformed figures (like a Changing of the
Guard set) are sold as collectable models and not toys. Their heritage role legitimates
the centrality of the Army to the notion of Britishness and its value is reflected in the
relatively high monetary cost of the figures. In each case, the packaging and
collectability of these figures propose the ordered containment of warlike activity in
practices of displaying the collection, or enacting specific narratives of rescue, combat
or processional spectacle like the ceremony of the Changing of the Guard at
Buckingham Palace.

Some games' narrative discourse uncannily reproduces the language in which
the Gulf Wars have been discussed in actuality. The visual representation of battle in
games reproduces the form of television coverage, where for instance BBC's
Newsnight used a sandpit diorama to represent battle positions in the 1991 Gulf War,
and nightly televised briefings by General Colin Powell used video pictures from air
missions, where weaponry was shown being unleashed. Like a computer game, the
war was represented as 'clean', de-humanised and well-managed. The actual war and
its representation in games mutually legitimated and confirmed each other, and each
representation of conflict emphasised the ability to manage the unpredictability and
messiness of war through practices of control.

Masculinity in Action Man Toys
Freud conceived of gender identity as an unstable and evolving process, and from that
foundation the cultural theorist of gender Jeffrey Weeks argues that:

Masculinity or the male identity is achieved by the constant process of warding off threats to it. It is precariously achieved by the rejection of femininity and of homosexuality. Male violence against women, and the taboo against male homosexuality may both be understood as effects of this fragile sense of identity, rooted both in the psychic traumas of childhood (in which boys must break their identification with women in order to become 'men') and in the historical norms which have defined male identity as counterposed to the moral chaos of homosexuality.[18]

Gender roles are fluid and changing, and only become adopted as differential masculine or feminine identities when the child is able to symbolise, by speaking and by using objects symbolically. In a society in which war play is proper for boys but not for girls, war play is one of the arenas in which the child is subjected to/by processes of identification and repudiation, but ones that are not monolithic or stable. Toys borrow from, and attain meaning through, the gender identities of adult culture, and thus also inherit the contradictions, resistances, and alternatives inherent in them. Warlike play legitimates masculine roles for boys, and is used as a way of marking their difference from girls. The theorist of children's games, Brian Sutton-Smith, remarked that games are 'models of power, by which we mean that they are buffered learning situations through which the child gains acquaintance and experience at the power stratagems relevant to some of the major parameters of influence within his own culture.'[19] Becky Francis concluded in a report for education professionals that this gender construction was massively overdetermined, and stated that war toys support the construction of masculinity as active, while the toys sold specifically for girls restrict activity to collecting, nurturing, or crafting, for instance.[20]

These distinctions are very evident in the Action Man toy range. The Action Man toy figure was introduced in January 1966. Initially there were three costumed figures: soldier, sailor and pilot. Since then the number of different incarnations of Action Man has exceeded 350, the majority being military figures but also a polar

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[18] Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1985), 190.
[19] Brian Sutton-Smith, 'The Game as a School of Abstraction' in Loyda M. Shears and Eli M. Bower (eds), *Games in Education and Development* (Springfield: CC Thomas, 1974), 119-127.
[20] Becky Francis, *Toys, Gender and Learning: Report to the Frobel Educational Institute* (London: Roehampton University, 2009).

explorer, footballer, astronaut or lifeguard. The repertoire of signifiers in the Action Man ensemble of products enables particular forms of play, which can serve a number of different functions.[21] One of these is to associate masculinity with action outside the familial and domestic sphere. This elides into a repudiation of the feminine since Action Man toys are explicitly differentiated from the doll figures, accessories and playsets representing domestic spaces which are marketed to girls. Action Man is never referred to as a doll on toy packaging or promotional material. The association of Action Man with masculinity depends on his structural relationship to other toys and elements of the childhood world, as much as on the forms of Action Man toys in themselves.[22] Some Action Man equipment is scaled for the miniature toy world, but also works on a child's scale. For instance the Street Combat Action Man figure (1994) had a twin missile launcher mounted on his belt, but this belt was designed to fit around a child's wrist so that it became a kind of toy gun. Clearly the child 'becomes' Action Man in a more direct exchange with the toy figure. Further, there are some Action Man branded toys made exclusively for the child's use (and not the figure's), like a dart gun or plastic hunting knife. Here there is a leap from child to Action Man without the intervention of the toy figure as physical surrogate. The range of Action Man toys, in their material form, allow for and supply a variety of identificatory relationships with Action Man as an emblem of masculine activity and proficiency, and at the same time as a repository of desires for violent action including hand-to-hand combat associated with savage and undisciplined aggression.

Representations of Action Man always distance him from femininity. The *Action Man Bumper 1996 Annual* (p.4) reports that one of his friends is 'Natalie - also known as Action Woman - they work together, but she is not his girlfriend'. Action Man's excessive masculinity is also in danger of blurring into homosexuality and is displaced onto Action Man's opponent, the evil Dr X, who functions as his negative mirror-image. Thanking Paul Strain (aged eight) for his letter to the 'Ask Dr X' page of *Action Man* comic (no. 5, November 1995, p.25) complimenting the Doctor on his hair, Dr X adds 'As for my hair, it's done by a lovely minion called Clive, and he'll be thrilled to know you like it.' The supposed narcissism of Dr X's attention to his

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[21] See Dawson, 'War Toys'.
[22] See Jonathan Bignell, '"Get Ready For Action!": Reading Action Man Toys', in Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins (eds), *'A Necessary Fantasy?': The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture* (New York: Garland, 2000), 231-250.

hair and his use of the adjective 'lovely' all point to the use of Dr X as a repository of the dangerous effeminacy of a hyper-masculinised Action Man world with a highly unstable notion of masculine sexuality. When a letter from Daniel Gifford (aged ten) asks Dr X in the same issue of *Action Man* comic, 'Do you like girls, yes or no?', he replies, 'Some of my best friends are girls. We like to swop clothes and help each other with our hair.' Play involving haircare is one of the key features of the exaggeratedly feminine world of dolls like Barbie. But the Action Man Operation T.I.G.E.R. figure (1995) was supplied with temporary tattoos for either the toy's body or the child's body. Indeed issue five of *Action Man* comic came with three child-sized stick-on tattoos as a free gift. There is a code of bodily adornment and narcissistic behaviour in the Action Man world, and this code stigmatises some activities as feminine while other quite similar activities are positively valued as masculine. And as the letter about Dr X's hair showed, children are interested in Dr X as well as Action Man.

The identities of the rational and effective Action Man versus the ineffective Dr X are established in relation to each other, matching the patterning of difference theorised by Judith Butler where 'the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding assumption'.[23] Action Man's physical appearance and costumes draw on a history of real wars, military uniforms, masculine professions and the dress codes associated with these. In contrast, Dr X's outlandish purple clothing alludes to the supervillains of American comics, and to the evil aliens of comics, cartoons, fantasy literature, television and cinema. His Mohican haircut combines resonances of barbarian-ness with rebelliousness and criminality by virtue of the style's association with youth gang subcultures. He has a mechanical hand, a laser eye, and a partly-exposed electronic brain, so that where Action Man looks human and familiar, Dr X is inhuman and other. While technology might more conventionally signify rational effectiveness, in the representation of Dr X technology is associated with bodily transformation away from the human and the rational, and towards the uncontrolled, the inhuman and the savage.

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[23] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

The majority of Action Man's incarnations are as a soldier with uniforms and weapons based on actual NATO equipment. His appeal rests on triggering war adventure narratives in a range of media, including films, TV and comics, for instance, and the positive attributes of masculine military heroism which these supply. He is constructed in a way that allows his body to be posed statically or in motion in action play scenarios (shooting, climbing, fighting etc.). Judy Attfield has discussed the history and significance of the articulated joints of Barbie and Action Man in these terms, to show 'how the cliché of "feminine" as passive and "masculine" as active is literally embodied in the design of the toys.'[24] Action Man has twenty moveable joints, at the wrist and ankles as well as at limb junctions, and he also has twisting biceps which enable his arm to be moved in ways impossible for the human body. While his body remains the same, the collectability of the themed figures and accessories encourages further buying of the product range, and a desire for the complete Action Man world of products. In this sense, Action Man is very similar to the themed figures and accessories of the Barbie doll world. But the crucial difference is that Action Man is equipped largely for active and goal-directed individual action, whereas Barbie is a passive figure equipped largely for dressing, haircare, and domestic leisure. The hard and completed bodies of adult-shaped toys like Action Man represent a recognition of the child's body as always-already lost, and always-already in the process of assimilation into an adult body and an adult world.

The Commodification and Remediation of Action Man

The period of highest Action Man sales was the late 1960s and early 1970s, when costume designs were changed in a regular three-year cycle, and between three and four million Action Man figures were sold annually. Another sales peak occured in 1982, when Action Man in Special Air Service (SAS) uniform became a top-ten best-selling toy because of recent synergies between toys and media representations. The action-adventure film *Who Dares Wins*, depicting SAS troops, was released and Britain went to war with Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas islands. In 1980, SAS troops had been shown on live television bursting into the Iranian Embassy in

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[24] Judy Attfield, 'Barbie and Action Man: adult toys for girls and boys, 1959-93', in Pat Kirkham (ed.), *The Gendered Object* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 80-89.

London to shoot terrorists who were holding hostages there. Action Man was relaunched by Hasbro-Bradley in 1994, with additional figures and accessories and new packaging. The toys were divided mainly into four product groupings: Military, Urban, Adventure and Aviation, each including figures, equipment sold separately, and vehicles or other large accessories. Action Man's opponent, the supervillain Dr X, was also launched.

Hasbro-Bradley is one of the largest of the world's toy manufacturers, and is linked into a network of subsidiary companies, affiliated producers of children's consumer products, and licensees of Hasbro brands. The Action Man figure is made by Hasbro-Bradley but was originally designed by the Research and Development staff of Palitoy, while Hasbro-Bradley not only produces GI Joe as well as Action Man but also distributed the lucrative VR Troopers and Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers brands, owned by Saban Entertainment. Hasbro-Bradley toy figures (such as Transformers) are represented in videos made by DIC in association with Tempo. Action Man appeared in a television series made by DIC, which was affiliated with Turner Broadcasting, who controlled First Independent Films. The *Action Man* comic was published by Tower Magazines, while the *Action Man Annual*s were published by Pedigree books, part of Pedigree Toys. The *Action Man* comic offered numerous play scenarios involving the toy range, and explicitly featured new or currently promoted products. The comic was an amalgam of at least three different types of text. In its settings and other war genre references, it was related to war comics, which use black and white drawing to represent heroic narratives where Allied soldiers use personal courage and military proficiency to overcome inexpert and cruel Nazi aggression. But the *Action Man* comic's colour, style of drawing and layout were reminiscent of the American superhero comics by Marvel and DC, where alongside physical prowess, superheroes like Spiderman or Superman also battle their own crises of identity, psychic traumas and uncertainty about their own moral rectitude. Combining these comic genres together, *Action Man* comic renders the character in more complex ways. The overarching trope of masculine effectiveness also admits a space within its representations for Action Man to experience the problematic working-through of his own role as masculine hero.

The mid-1990s *Action Man* television series was another opportunity to produce narratives around the products. The television *Action Man* concept was intended to be a live-action children's drama, but the format was changed to animated

drama with a live-action introductory sequence. Mark Griffin, who was Trojan in the British network television version of *Gladiators*, was cast as Action Man. Using a Gladiator for the role drew on masculine gender codes and narrative functions (challenge, contest, and moral judgement for instance), since *Gladiators* was as excessive in its masculinity as the Action Man toys. The body, the clothing and the accessories of Action Man toy figures were enfolded in a diverse but coherent textual world, where play with the toys could be facilitated and extended by multiple narratives in several media.

Action Man was stigmatised in discourse addressed to adults at this time, however, in a Christmas 1995 television commercial for Early Learning Centre (ELC) shops, shown on Britain's Channel 4 network at around 8.30pm. It featured a stop-motion animated military figure dressed in combat gear with a machine-gun (i.e., Action Man) accompanied by a doll with long blonde hair, red dress, fur coat, high boots and pearls (i.e., Barbie). They had sneaked into an ELC shop, and are first seen hiding under a slide. No matter how hard they try, they cannot attract the attention of the happy toddlers in the store, who are playing with primary-coloured blocks, books and other educational toys. A male voice-over knowingly comments, 'Some toys will never get into Early Learning Centre, because we only have toys that make learning fun.' An adult female hand picks up the Action Man figure and then we see the toys landing sprawled on the concourse of the shopping mall, thrown out of the shop.   An adult female voice asks, 'When are you going to learn? You'll never get into Early Learning.' Action Man (and Barbie) functioned as totemic figures for adults, differentiating types of toy and toyshop. The positive connotations of ELC are clear, and are based on guilt and fear about children's development.

A contrasting Action Man commercial was shown in GMTV's Saturday morning schedule for children (6.00 am to 9.25 am) at the same time. Like many boys' toy commercials it showed no girls or adults, placed a toy in a fantasy setting rather than in a child's home, and was characterised by rapid editing, a noisy soundtrack and an American-accented male voice-over. It advertised the Action Man Heligun, a helicopter with a gunsight, missile launchers, and a machine-gun with a red flashing light. It is at once a child-sized gun and a vehicle which accommodates Action Man. A narrative constructed a play scenario of conflict between Action Man and Dr X, which could be enacted by the child using the Heligun toy. A series of shots showed a boy holding the Heligun, frowning and with gritted teeth as he enacts

Action Man's Heligun attack on Dr X's base. The sequence aligns the viewer's with the boy's point of view, alludes to war-film action sequences and fetishises the exciting functions of the Heligun. In contrast to the Early Learning Centre commercial, this advertisement promotes excitement, aggression, masculinity, technology, and Americanness. The action shifts between the child and action seemingly carried out by the toys themselves, to live-action adaptation of play. The slippages between boy and Action Man, aggression and pleasure, fantasy and realism, testify to the rebellion against norms of quiet, educational, imaginative and social play that Early Learning Centre represents. At the heart of these representations there is a paradox that they attempt to anneal, for violence is an aspect of the controlled activity that is offered as an aspect of masculinity, but also an arena where violence can be desired and enjoyed while the scripts of rational control and purposefulness are temporarily suspended. In the Heligun commercial, play is neither playful nor childish but earnest, and based on masculine warlikeness. Analysing toys requires the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of meanings that they can carry, and the very different interests, needs and fantasies supported by the discourses of and about children's culture.

On another level, these war toys and games perform the significant function of rendering war itself a natural phenomenon of the real world; the world of adulthood

The anxieties that adults have about this scripting of the uses of toys derive from two contrasting views of children. Children are regarded as incomplete, irrational, and disposed to disordered behaviour, so that intervention is required in order to push play in a legitimised direction, towards adulthood. But children are also regarded as uncorrupted, innocent, and authentic, so that they need to be protected from the adult world. The intervention of adults in the Early Learning Centre commercial is a concrete instance of this supervision of children's development, but it is notable that in the commercial the children seen playing are clearly uninterested in the Action Man or Barbie figures, thus 'proving' that they are not 'by nature' susceptible to the figures' potentially corrupting influence. This representation of the child is a sign of loss and nostalgia, and as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein has argued it is a potential and an origin that is always already lost and thus desired by adults.[25]

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[25] Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Childhood and Textuality: Culture, History, Literature' in Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 1-28.

that children are about to enter. As Roland Barthes wrote in his short essay on toys in *Mythologies*, 'French toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the Post Office, Medicine ..., School, Hair-Styling..., Transport..., Science....'[26] The cultural function of war toys is not crudely to inculcate national and cultural stereotypes, but to naturalise the concept of war as both natural and eternal. Toys of all kinds prepare the child to be a consumer of myths, as well as a consumer of products. As Barthes comments, 'the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it; there are prepared for him actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy.'[27] This is a kind of apprenticeship for adulthood. Children's knowledge about, and desire for brands like Action Man is part of their socialisation into consumer culture, and thus a sign of the adulthood which Ellen Seiter calls 'a system of meaningful social categories embedded in commodities and sets of commodities.'[28] Action Man has short-lived and numerous costume and accessory designs, in order to sustain the long-lived brand by rapid turnover of new brand extensions and spin-off products. The presence of relatively cheap and relatively expensive products in the toy range allows for different patterns of ownership and toy-buying. Cheaper equipment packs might be purchased by children themselves, while expensive vehicles could be bought by adults. More fortunate or affluent children may be able to possess most or all of the range of toys, but even economically disadvantaged children or families can buy into the Action Man brand. The availability of a large number of Action Man products, and the introduction of new products at regular intervals, allows for collectability and the reinforcement of brand loyalty to Action Man rather than his numerous competitor soldier figures. As a long-lived and widely-recognised brand, Action Man can also be attached to other children's consumer products by other manufacturers using the Action Man logo or image under licence, thus stimulating sales of Action Man products as well as those featuring his likeness or logo.

Toys are as stratified and codified as adult products, but one reason that adults may not perceive the systems of meaning in toys at all is that toys constitute a

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[26] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada, 1973), 53.
[27] *Ibid.*, 54.
[28] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 205.

children's world, some of whose value is that it is different and even inimical to the values of the adult world. For the activities of playing with toys must always include possibilities for using the toys in ways other than those which adults' construction of their scripts for play attempt to enforce. Inasmuch as they concretise and express social meanings for children, toys are therefore available as totemic objects around which children's difference from adults can be organised. Having and playing with toys partly constitutes childhood. Furthermore, the possession of particular toys differentiates children into groups, providing a common language of interaction from which adults are usually excluded. Boys are differentiated from girls in part by their toys, and collectors of one toy range can be differentiated from collectors of another. As consumers children are both fickle and discriminating, which makes them a difficult market but also potentially loyal devotees of brands with a strong identity and peer desirability. Across the different aspects of toys considered in this chapter, from the representation of wars to the distinctions of gender, to the commodity economy of toys and their promotion across different media forms, disciplinary forces of control are visible that attempt to manage the necessarily unruly and multiple significance of brands, products and texts. The conception of childhood, too, is characterised by unstable boundaries between the civilised and the savage, the innocent and the sinful, and indeed between childhood and adulthood.

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