

Child's Play:

Reading and Remaking Gendered Action Texts in Toys

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*Chapter 3 in Literacies, Sexualities, and Gender: Understanding Identities from
Preschool to Adulthood*

Abstract:

When children pick up and play with their favorite toys, they are also taking up a complex mix of gender messages and cultural expectations about *who* they can be and *how* they should play. Drawing on sociocultural theories that conceptualize literacy as mediated action and play as a literacy that produces action texts, this chapter examines preschoolers' pretend play to uncover the literacies that children use to make stories crafted with bodies, toys, and popular media. Toys are invitations to enact beloved character identities and media narratives but also engage playgroup practices and gender expectations for players. Mediated discourse analysis of young girls' interactions with toys during dramatic play reveals how the smallest actions—cradling a doll or waving a stick—fit into live-action stories and into larger patterns of expectations for “doing girl”. This chapter examines how everyday play reshapes toys' embedded meanings and remakes these expectations, making child's play an important site for reimagining gendered possibilities.

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The term *child's play* calls forth images of young children pretending with dolls, blocks, stuffed animals, miniature cars, games, and other toys in playrooms or playgrounds. Play suggests an aimless innocence that belies the rigorous work children do as they try on cultural scripts about who they should be and become. During play, children explore the many roles they have observed as participants in everyday events in their worlds. Children's playthings are designed to communicate cultural expectations and anticipated futures to players (Brougère, 2006). For example, toy ads in the 1925 Sears catalog focused on the value of toys as preparation for gender-specific vocations: kitchen playsets and baby dolls forecast roles for girls as "little homemakers" and mothers while mechanical cars and construction sets positioned boys as budding industrialists and entrepreneurs (Daly, 2017). A century later, gender division remains a key strategy by the toy industry for marketing toys, evident in toy manufacturer annual reports that measure earnings by consumer gender and are readily apparent in color-coded toy aisles: pastel colors mark toys for girls, neon and metallic for boys. Thus, cultural messages about gender expectations are expressed in multiple ways: through the roles and practices a toy inspires, through advertising that entices consumers to buy it, and through its design and sensory messages molded into its color, texture, and shape. In this way, toys communicate identity expectations about who children should become and how they should play.

Toys are big business, distributing their gendered messages on a global scale. In 2016, world-wide retail sales of toys totaled over 88 billion dollars (The Toy Association, 2018). Today, extensive media franchises merge toys with a line of everyday consumer products, licensed and decorated with popular media characters. Children can live in their favorite character's merchandise, dressed head to toe from breakfast to bedtime in licensed apparel, fortified by branded vitamins, fueled by branded snacks, and tucked snugly into cartoon-festooned bedding at night. Popular media franchises touch every aspect of daily living, making toys intensely personal for children. As many parents know too well, children can develop passionate attachments to favorite characters, so that a special doll or toy becomes essential to family routines and bedtime rituals (Marsh, 2005). The pervasive reach and immersive nature of commercial franchises in children's play has prompted ongoing debate over the identity-shaping impact of gender messages in children's media (e.g., Buckingham, 2007; Hains & Foreman-Brunell, 2015).

We still know too little about the ways very young children take up gendered texts in toys and play. What happens when children bring the toys they love to preschool? What kinds of pretense do the toys inspire as children play together? What do children make of the emphatic gender divisions in popular media? How do they navigate the tangle of identity expectations that comes with their toys? This chapter focuses on data excerpted from six years of research on early childhood literacies, focusing here on a year-long study of play literacies in one preschool classroom. A close look at one playgroup's interactions with media toys reveals that while six young girls took up normative expectations for highly feminized performances as they pretended to be fairies and ponies, they also drew on the transformative power

of pretense and wielded toys strategically to carry out their own social purposes: to get their hands on a coveted toy, to enact a powerful character, to create an exciting story, to take the lead in a popular playgroup, and to find a place to belong in the preschool peer culture.

Play, Gender, Literacies, and Toys

Play and Expected Gender Practices

Through play, children re-enact everyday practices, performing their understandings of the naturalized ways of belonging expected within a particular culture (Bourdieu, 1977). Mediated discourse focuses on mediated action (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), in this case, the ways players wield toys and rework their meanings to create a play scene and participate in a playgroup. Mediated actions are the embodied ways of using things, acquired and engrained through participation in routine practices shared by a cultural group (Scollon, 2001).

In preschool, three- to five-year-old children are just learning how to play together and how to belong in peer and school cultures. Early childhood curriculum explicitly develops social abilities by teaching children how to take turns and share scarce classroom materials, how to cooperate rather than playing alone, or how to negotiate who plays which roles (DeVries & Zan, 2012). As young children learn how to cooperate by sharing toys and pretending together, they also learn unspoken rules for gender performances: who can play a fairy or a superhero, who decides which ideas for stories are followed, who distributes the toys, and which characters can be revised. Play invites performances of femininities and masculinities beyond media content. As children play, they are also learning how to do gender in everyday practices and to enact becoming girls and women in a gendered community of practice (Paetcher, 2006). A community of practice suggests a peopled set of identities, positions, and roles but here the focus is on social practices—the doings rather than the beings.

Butler's (1990) feminist conceptualization of gender performativity theorizes gender as a thing (fluidly) done through performances of available identities. In this perspective, gender is accomplished through action and participation, rather than internalized as an innate, universal, or unified subjectivity. Particular combinations of practices are performed, justified, and expected by overlapping, and often contradictory, global discourses that circulate within a given place, such as a preschool classroom. In early childhood, young children's emergent performances emulate and approximate the gendered sets of practices they observe as they participate as novices within a *nexus of practice* (Scollon, 2001), a set of naturalized expectations and engrained actions for participating and making sense with materials in a culture. Play enables children to intentionally try on otherwise inaccessible identities in their performances and to pretend they are more powerful and more adept at enacting the core practices in a nexus of practice (Vygotsky,

1978).

Gender performances are not predetermined, however, even by the well-worn ways of doing things within a nexus of practice. When children pick up toys, they pick up a set of expected social practices and gender performances for playing with each toy. But there is agency in the ways players navigate among these practices, shifting among a toy's repertoire of anticipated identities and practices and slipping past the limitations of media stereotypes through each player's enacted pretense and intentional performance. In play, meanings are imagined, agreed upon, and reimagined for toys in the moment. These improvisations are invented spontaneously and always provisional. Play produces a collective representation of agreed-upon meanings in an imaginary context that suspends the conventional meanings of people and things in a physical location and replaces these meanings with pretend ones.

Play Literacies, Action Texts, and Toys

What does all this have to do with literacy? Definitions of literacy are in transition and expanding to include messages of all sorts in diverse forms of communication. At a fundamental level, literacy uses bodies, tools, and materials to make sense of and participate in the world. From this wider perspective, toys are texts and play is a literacy that produces a live-action story full of meanings composed by its players. Research on early childhood literacy in New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996) has established that learning that builds upon young children's popular media passions deeply engages them in storytelling. Play can develop literary skills by tapping into children's media knowledge of story structures such as dramatic action and characterization (Paley, 2004; Dyson, 2003; Marsh, 2014). More importantly, this research establishes that children at play also wield literacies to enact more empowered identities, to express their cultural knowledge, and to shape their social worlds.

Play is a powerful and accessible literacy that enables children to independently express ideas through storytelling with bodies and imaginary worlds, rather than with pencil and paper. Through pretense, children craft *action texts* with bodies and toys as they enact scenarios made up on the spot that are meaningful and transformative in the moment to the players, whether or not they are captured in a photo or video (Wohlwend, 2011). The pretend stories produced during play are situated in complex and dynamic relations among children, friendships, and childhood cultures. Action texts engage a toy's dense set of possible practices suggested by its embedded messages: emotional attachments to characters, corporate marketing strategies, community gender performances, character roles in film narratives, and peer friendships and social relationships at school. The notion of toys as texts draws from research on artifactual literacies (Rowell & Pahl, 2007) that unpacks the histories of prior meanings, identities, and uses in household artifacts and family keepsakes. Elsewhere, I have argued that anticipated identities

for gendered players and consumers are designed into media toys such as Disney Princess dolls or Star Wars light sabers and circulated through media storylines and marketing processes (Wohlwend, 2009, 2012).

Methods: Tracking Gendered Action Texts in a Preschool Classroom

To understand how children played with the identity texts in media toys and negotiated player and adult expectations for gender performances and play group participation, I used mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon and Scollon, 2004) that began with mapping popular classroom locations where children frequently played to identify preferred play practices, themes, toys, and play groups. Video data captured play activity during 16 two-hour morning sessions across an academic year. Participants were 21 (12 boys and 9 girls) three-year-old to five-year-old children, two teachers, and one paraprofessional in a preschool in a Midwestern university community in the United States.

Analysis of video data located instances where children used a set of media toys to see how they negotiated 1) their shared storytelling and 2) their social relationships in the play group. Children's negotiations with toys were examined within play events when a group of children shared a common set of toys and played together to produce an agreed-upon pretend scenario. To look closely at children's interaction with popular media, I compared play events to examine gender performances as children negotiated issues of toy possession, spoken references to media content (e.g., character names or actions, lyrics from media songs, scripts for character actions), player roles such as who could direct/follow play themes, and class histories of shared agreements about how a toy should be used, what it could mean, and whether its meaning could be changed. Multimodal analysis of video data made visible the unspoken ways players also negotiated the unfolding story. Modes signaled changes in participation when players shifted bodies and objects in their toy handling, their body posture, or proximity to one another, or movement across classroom locations that indicated possession, insider/outsider status, agreement or leadership in the playgroup, or authorship in initiating a new story direction.

Playing Fairies and Ponies in Preschool

Children in the three to five-year-old preschool class stayed together for up to three years, but the class changed each fall as a new group of three-year-olds arrived and a group of five-year-olds moved on to kindergartens in other schools. In addition, some children arrived throughout the year as families moved in and out. Nevertheless, the membership of the playgroups remained remarkably stable throughout the year of the study. Most playgroups consisted of the same two or three players; a few children played alone or moved among the groups. The three-year-old children often wandered or watched, playing briefly with a group but largely played alone or near the periphery of playgroups. Analysis of video data recorded in weekly visits over the course of the year showed that the playgroups in

this classroom were typically divided by gender: girls played with girls and boys played with boys.

Each playgroup developed their own favorite themes for pretend play and many of the preferred themes that spanned the entire year were media-based. For example, two five-year-old boys often pretended they were Marvel and DC superheroes; two four-year-old girls played scenes from Disney's *Frozen*, and three four-year-old boys pretended that the miniature cars and wooden train sets were *Transformers*, based on Hasbro's franchise of toy cars that twist and turn into robots. The largest playgroup consisted of six four-year old and five-year-old girls who shared a passionate interest in princess and fairy media themes, and their play reflected this in fantasy scenes intertwined with family events such as mealtimes, baby care, and pet care.

Each day, the teachers set out new materials for children to explore. For example, literacy activities included paging through new picture books on the small sofa and tracing letters with glitter glue. Sensory activities included bubble-blowing and playdough sculpture, math activities included block construction and stretching measuring tapes around classroom objects. Science activities included sorting stones and shells and filling containers at the water table and other activities often found in progressive play-based preschool education. These daily activities inspired the children to play across same-sex playgroups for as long as their interest in the materials held, but when their interest faded, the children usually returned to play with their same-gender playgroups and preferred media themes.

Negotiating Passion, Possession, and My Little Pony Toys

The following excerpt from the video data shows the complexity that children faced when negotiating a role to play and a chance to hold a treasured toy when My Little Ponies came to preschool.

It's early morning in preschool but play is already in full swing. Three girls--Ella, Leah, Maya—are running back and forth between the blocks center and the house corner, waving xylophone drumsticks repurposed as fairy wands. Each girl is wearing a set of pastel fairy wings made of a glittery gauzy fabric stretched over plastic frames. The fairies stop to inspect the satin and lace princess gowns on the dress-up clothing rack. Pulling a pink gown off the dress-up clothing rack, Maya asks, "Where's my magic wand? I'm Ariel the Queen."

At this moment, Riley and Morgan arrive with their mother. They've brought four My Little Pony toys to school today and Julia immediately walks over to see if she can hold one of the toys. She carries the toy back to the house corner and sits down at a small table. Without removing her parka, Riley follows Julia who is now cuddling the plush "Twilight Sparkle", stroking the pony's pink and purple yarn mane and its silky iridescent wings.

Riley: "That's my Twilight," pointing to the stuffed pony. Julia places the toy on the table but keeps a firm grip on one of the pony's hind legs as the playgroup begins a complex negotiation over how six girls will play with four toys.

The fairy imaginary had been going on for weeks and sharing patterns were already established for the fairy wings. The ponies were new on this day, and that novelty alone produced intense interest in toys among preschoolers. This desire mixed the attraction of a favorite media character with the sensory experience of handling the toy itself: children spent a great deal of time gazing at the colorful sparkly accessories on the ponies and fingering their soft manes.

The color of each pony mattered as well. In the My Little Pony franchise, each pony has a distinct character, marked by a unique color scheme that provides the means of differentiating the toys, which otherwise have identical hard plastic molded bodies and nylon manes. The overall pastel palette of pink, violet, blue, and yellow for the bodies and manes aligns with color schemes that market toys to a demographic of girls under five. Twilight Sparkle, a pink and purple pony princess, was represented by two of the four toys in the previous vignette. This character is the lead in the "Friendship is Magic" animated television series, a 2011 update to the three decade-old My Little Pony franchise. In the cartoon episodes, Twilight Sparkle is a winged unicorn princess with magical superpowers. The Twilight Sparkle character was desirable to the young girls in this classroom on multiple levels - as new toy at school, as the main character in one of their favorite franchises, and as a princess/superhero character that opened a repertoire of royal leadership actions and super-powered abilities within any pretense in relation to other possible player roles.

Research demonstrates that popular media knowledge and possession of desired toys can confer status within peer culture (Pugh, 2009). Simply holding a toy can suggest a role and open a spot in a playgroup so that a child can join in the pretense. Over days of play, toys can become anchors that ensure a place in the story and a history of participation in a playgroup. Scarcity of highly-valued toys or "entry vehicles" within a preschool classroom gives these treasured objects added allure (Elgas, Klein, Kantor, & Fernie, 1988, p. 149). The desire that the ponies evoked required several rounds of adult mediation in this session, mostly in the form of verbal reminders to Morgan and Riley (and indirectly to the whole playgroup) to share or the ponies would be put away. As a result, Riley and Ella worked to distribute the ponies among the other players peaceably to keep precious toys from being confiscated by monitoring adults. But children also had their own purposes for sharing as distributing toys also assigned a role and included a friend in the story under construction by this established playgroup.

As the next section shows, children's collaborative storytelling required more than amicable turn-taking. Children not only had to reconcile their independent ideas about characters and story actions while managing their friendships, they also had difficulty getting their negotiations over content recognized as valid storytelling by

vigilant adults who were intent on keeping the girls from fighting over the My Little Pony toys.

A Harmony Imperative: No Fighting

The *Friendship Is Magic My Little Pony* television series focuses on themes of kindness and friendship among the six main characters: five of the ponies enact “Elements of Harmony” --honesty, kindness, laughter, generosity, and loyalty—each represented by a jewel on the “Tree of Harmony”. When combined, the jewels create a super-powered sixth pony: the magical unicorn princess Twilight Sparkle. Harmony—or playing nicely and getting along with friends--is the overarching theme of all the episodes: heroes foster harmony among the pony friends and villains sow discord. A key antagonist, “Discord, the Spirit of Disharmony,” is a super-powered chimera whose capricious antics are modeled after the trickster Q in *Star Trek’s The Next Generation*. The children’s preferred villain was Nightmare Moon, the evil alter ego of Princess Luna, who eventually reverts to her princess form after rescue by the other ponies. A recurring trope in the My Little Pony episodes is the power of friendship to redeem villains and turn them into (somewhat flawed) friends.

The My Little Pony narratives circulate an ethos of friendship and cooperation above all things: friends before self, sharing rather than getting, and cooperation over competition. These might seem innocuous lessons and well-intentioned promotion of pro-social behavior. But this becomes problematic when emphatic gender division in marketing targets girls for a droning insistence on getting along instead of getting ahead, deferring and helping rather than claiming credit, and of putting others before self in episode after episode. So, what happened to this feminized obligation to maintain harmony during young girls’ play with the pony toys? The following excerpt from the video data of the same morning of preschool play illustrates how the girls negotiated around gendered media narratives.

The playgroup clusters around Ella and Maya, debating who should play which character.

Morgan:[arguing for a role] A tree of harmony. A tree of harmony. A tree of harmony.

Riley: A tree of harmony.

Ella: I’m the Queen of Melody.

Maya: [agreeing] I mean, I’m not the Queen of Melody anymore.

Ella: No, I am.

Maya: [attempting to make clear that she agrees] I am too. Just because you said it,

you are.

Teacher: [Misinterpreting this negotiation of roles as a dispute over possession of the pony toys] If you guys all fight, then it needs to go in your cubby.

Holding the pony aloft, Ella announces "The Queen of Melody is the queen!" and runs out of the library and away from the adults. All the ponies follow, running, skipping, and galloping in a looping line around the classroom, ending in the far corner of the play kitchen and well away from the teacher's monitoring gaze.

In this moment, Ella established herself as leader and rescued the ponies from removal by the adults.. Ella's shift to pretense foreclosed the confused negotiations about who was playing the queen. Suddenly, turn-taking around Nightmare Moon interrupts Ella's nascent story and re-alerts the adults to the potential for discord.

Morgan [rushing into the play group, grabs the Nightmare Moon out of Maya's hands] Noooooo, nooooo. I want to play with this blue [Nightmare Moon].

Morgan's mother to Morgan [taking Nightmare Moon away from Morgan]: Hey! Hey! I think we need to take the pony home.

Morgan to her mother: Ok, you win. Morgan walks up to Julia and takes the small Twilight pink pony away from Julia and hands her the large Twilight plush pony in exchange. Riley watches the exchange, hands clasped tightly as if in silent prayer. Morgan returns to her mother and hands over the small pink Twilight pony while Julia watches.

Mother to Morgan: I don't think you're ready to bring toys to school.

Morgan: I want my pony.

Mother, handing Nightmare Moon back to Morgan: Ok, but I don't want any fighting.

Riley: [Repeating her mother's point, Riley returns to Ella and Maya, shaking her finger for emphasis.] Guys, no fighting. No fighting, guys.

Maya to Riley: We're NOT fighting.

Mother to Morgan: I was talking to YOU.

Maya: [Shouting at Riley angrily about losing Nightmare Moon to Morgan] I don't have any more powers and that's because of my ponies!

Ella: [quickly halts Maya's scolding of Riley by offering her own toys to Maya and shifting back into pretense.] Don't worry. You can use my wand and my pony and take care of it.

Maya [objecting]: But the queen has a lot of power.

*Ella: Don't worry. We can do this together. Let's go! But we don't have much time!
[Ella runs away to the block center.]*

Maya: [Following Ella] I have ten power. I have a hundred. I have ten hundred.

The girls are off to wage war against the imaginary Queen of Melody, using their magic wands and toy ponies to battle an army of "wizards with ten millions of powers".

Pastel ponies and fairy wands are examples of toys with hyper-feminine texts that target preschool girls. The repeated expectations across such toys create resonances that seem to close off alternative performance options. Media franchises such as My Little Pony or Disney Fairies circulate similar expectations for 'girly girls' identities in an emphasized femininity discourse (Blaise 2005). Yet in this episode, prohibitions against fighting in the toys' narratives about harmony were easily set aside during girls' negotiations for turns or in their storying which focused on magical powers to battle enemies. Adult monitoring constructed these negotiations as fighting and threatened to shut down play at the first sign of conflict among the girls. Still, the children were also able to use the accessibility of play to escape confining adult rules and to gallop away into pretense.

Embracing and Slipping Past Media Stereotypes

Child's play produces fluid performances that are subject to continual negotiation among players. In preschool peer cultures, issues around sharing materials and ideas rise to the forefront as children work through the problems of working together, managing desirable toys, and becoming friends while producing space distinct from adults. The notion of toys as texts enables a look beyond surface gender stereotypes in verbal scripts in film narratives, advertising messages, and corporate marketing strategies. Contradictions among the toys' designed texts and the meanings children give to them create slippages that open the range of action texts that children play. In this play instance, deferential gendered roles associated with pony toys were twisted or remade through pretend meanings that children created, overlooking multimodal messages designed into toy materials' shapes, textures, and colors, and slipping past school rules that governed how players were to behave and how toys were to be shared.

Implications for Literacy Education and Cross-Disciplinary Fields

This short analysis of a morning spent with girls, fairies, and ponies in preschool suggests several implications for thinking about gender performances in children's play, not just in early childhood education but in a range of fields. The realization that children are actively co-producing and remaking action texts with toys as they

play should give rise to more creative approaches for engaging children as participants and learners in math, science, arts, and other fields. Children can negotiate roles and even highly-gendered materials in quite sophisticated ways when they are given meaning-making tools that are appropriate for them, such as play that enables negotiation and collaboration. The degree of collaboration in pretend play is influenced by children's developing abilities to communicate their intentions through language and literacy. One of the strengths of play is that it is a natural literacy that enables children to communicate and negotiate their individual ideas for storytelling as they work to maintain a shared imaginary context (Wohlwend, 2019).

Despite an excess of pastels, glitter, and directives for harmony and peace, girls were able to take up satisfying roles and invent powerful characters, even while playing fairies and ponies. At the same time, the longstanding and incorrigible gender division in the toy industry with its insistence on pink identifiers and passive storylines for girls should concern parents, educators, and producers of children's media and toys. Heightened awareness of the gender-emphatic messages children encounter through popular media and toys is only a tiny step toward expanding the range of play exploration for children. Educators and caregivers of young children also need to examine how children's play is interpreted, which kinds of play are sanctioned and for whom, and how to restructure play opportunities to invite a wider range of gender performances and representations.

Finally, children need places to play together to make sense of their worlds. The fluidity in children's action texts suggest the potential of play as a key site for understanding new practices for cultural participation for children and youth. It is just as important to recognize the significance of play as a space for identity exploration for older youth and to understand the value of play in spaces beyond early childhood and beyond classrooms. The disappearance of play spaces from neighborhoods, playgrounds, and even from early childhood classrooms means that children have fewer opportunities to open up pretend worlds and to negotiate together as they work out possible meanings and re-makings of gendered identities.

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