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## **Guest Editor's Introduction**

### **Toys Matter: The Power of Playthings**

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**I**N SEPTEMBER 1993, sixteen scholars from eleven countries were invited to Utrecht Holland to discuss the state of play and toy research. Although the importance of play, play theory, and play research was well established, the group noted that the very objects of play—the toys themselves—were conspicuously missing from much of this work. They attributed this gap in the pantheon of play research to several factors. Part of the problem stemmed from a prevailing view within academia that toys are just simple, trivial, or frivolous objects—not something worthy of serious study beyond their role as a play prop (Almqvist 2004). However, mounting concerns regarding toy safety and claims linking toys, video games, and toy advertising to various social problems suggested more was involved.

It was becoming clear that a definite need existed for toy-focused research—research designed to look at more than just the impact of particular toys on play and development, but research that also addressed broader questions regarding the toy industry, consumer and popular culture, the sociology of childhood, and the relationship between toys, games, and other media products.

However, the lack of a central repository or organization to serve as the go-to place to find existing scholarship and to connect with colleagues was a major impediment to developing this kind of research. Indeed, the need to connect toy researchers and to support their work so that it could be more relevant and accessible drove the group's deliberations (Goldstein 2014). That meeting laid the groundwork for the creation of the International Toy Research Association (ITRA).

Founded for the purpose of promoting, stimulating, and encouraging toy and plaything research globally and to promote the development of toys for all, ITRA held its first world conference three years later. Thanks to the vision and steadfast leadership of these pioneers, ITRA is now the longest standing

professional research association dedicated specifically to the transdisciplinary scientific study of toys, games, and other types of playthings.

Fast forward to 2023 when ITRA held its thirtieth anniversary world conference at The Strong National Museum of Play—its first time to meet in North America. This special issue of the *American Journal of Play* builds on the conference's theme, "Toys Matter: The Power of Playthings." This theme is rooted in ITRA's cofounder Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) argument that only by carefully examining the contexts in which we find toys, the worlds of discourse created from them, and the ways in which toys shape our private and collective imaginations can we comprehend their power. The contributors to this special issue reflect the diversity of scholarly traditions and approaches that Sutton-Smith championed and that has been a hallmark of toy research. Each, in their own way, critically examines the power of playthings and the many ways they matter to and for children as well as to and for adults. They focus attention on the role toys play in our individual and collective identities, the various ways these reflect and shape our worlds (both positively or negatively), and the impact of technology and societal and cultural crises on our toys, play, and lives.

Important to note that for our purposes we use the term "toys" as a general referent meant to include any play object, whether physical, virtual, or hybrid, as well as games and puzzles. Including all manner of playthings under the larger umbrella of toy research better positions us to examine the rhetoric and materiality of toys, games, and puzzles *vis-à-vis* one another. It also opens the conversation to consider the ludic practices of adults and their relationships to their own toys and games throughout their lifespans.

The articles in this issue shed light on real-life problems as well as the potentialities related to concerns of equality, peace, and opportunity in toyland, especially when it comes to whose voices get magnified or silenced within the creation and promotion of games and toys. Research like this opens the door to questions about the impact of such inclusion or exclusion not only on the kinds of playthings available but on what we come to believe about ourselves and others.

The power of playthings is multilayered and multifaceted. From their environmental and psychological impacts to the question of who is represented and how, the quality and characteristics of toys matter. As the tools of serious fun, toys are meant to be toyed with as much as played with. Toying with toys creates disruptions and new meanings, and it opens new worlds of possibility. Toys have the power to inspire, to promote learning, and to connect with others. They

are also used to grieve, to console, and to cope. They can afford comfort during lockdowns or in the aftermath of natural and human-made disasters. In the face of social unrest or geopolitical turmoil, toys can transform into instruments of protest, resistance, and potent political tools (Grzelczyk 2024). Toys empower and heal. However, they can also oppress and harm. Whether in the face of a host of “isms” that marginalize and exclude or in response to unconscionable acts of violence, toys and games have been cast as both culprit and cure. Sorting out such claims is exactly why we critically need toy research, perhaps more now than ever.

ITRA's founders knew toys are far more than mere playthings or simple commodities in the market. They are integral to our lives, to our understanding of ourselves in relation to friends, family, and the larger community. The papers, interviews, and book reviews in this issue focus attention on the role of toys in the face of pandemic-related shutdowns, prejudices, exclusion, and marginalization and the existential threats of war. They offer new perspectives and challenge us to think deeply about the role of toys in our world. I hope that this special issue launches future research that addresses and embraces the power of toys in all their many forms.

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