



WAR TOYS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY



Impact Objectives

- Provide a new approach to the 'war play' debate that focuses on children's play in a geopolitical context, rather than just as child development
- Examine how children's war play is shaped by, and in turn shapes, political and cultural identities and views of the military

Children as consumers: war play

The military's increasingly visible role in British society raises new questions about how children approach geopolitical questions through war play. Dr Tara Woodyer introduces some innovative research on toys, political identity and conflict



From the point of view of your research, what is particularly important about war play?

We wanted to explore how children perceive the rise in visibility of the military and conflict, the ways in which they gain knowledge of it, and how they might respond to it. We try to position war play in the wider social and political contexts in which it takes place (intergenerational and family relations, peer cultures, and geopolitical climates), rather than pretending it happens in a bubble. We are interested in how children make sense of, and actively contribute to shaping, the world around them.

Could you describe the new method you've developed to investigate these questions?

We focused on action figures, whereas past studies have tended to focus on toy guns. We approached war play from multiple angles, investigating the design and manufacture of historical and contemporary action figure ranges, how people respond to war toys in an intergenerational museum setting, how children play with action figures in group settings in school, and crucially, how children play with them as part of their typical family routine at home. Rather than using observational methods that rely on adult interpretations of play from the researcher's perspective,

we use 'ethnographically informed ethnography' (pioneered in previous Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research), which enables children to create a shared knowledge about experiences of war play with the researcher. This involves the researcher playing with the child and the various toys and digital media in their own toy collection as well as action figures, and the child filming their own play. The latter can take various forms, including the child setting up the video camera in the corner of the room, using the video camera as an active component of the play, directing the researcher to film particular aspects and/or filming the researcher at play.

How does this method improve your results?

This approach allowed us to identify patterns in individual children's play, such as preferred play genres and intertextual cultural references, that informed the way they played with action figures. The video work allowed the child to direct attention to particular aspects of the play. This allowed us to develop a shared knowledge about the children's war play, why they enjoyed it, the influences that shaped it, and their wider understanding of the geopolitical world.

How do children play with war-related toys?

Our study found that children's war play is informed and shaped by geopolitical contexts as well as toys, play settings, and cultural references to films and TV in very

powerful ways. Some action figure play made no reference to war or conflict. Some play didn't involve any narrative, children simply enjoyed manipulating, undressing and redressing the poseable figures, exploring the different ways a parachute or vehicle could move, or bodily movements and practicing hand-eye co-ordination. The children's play was shaped by a broad mix of intertextual influences, combining 'reality' and 'fantasy' (for example, zombies and mermaids) in play narratives and scenarios. These intertextual influences included, amongst others, films, TV programmes, video games, and other toys. We found that children do not play with war toys in isolation, but blend different genres of play and toys in their activity.

The vast array of play types and scenarios the children developed far exceeded those immediately suggested by the military design of the toy. This clearly shows that we need to appreciate that war play is as an open ended activity that cannot be over-determined or explained prior to it happening. Whilst the design and material properties of war toys shape how they are played with, they do not fully determine their use or meaning, since play is an inherently creative practice.





War toys and cultural identity

*How do children use war play to make sense of real conflict, and does this have a broader significance beyond childhood? A new project, **Ludic Geopolitics: children's play, war toys and re-enchantment with the British military**, investigates*

Today's children, unlike their parents' generation, have grown up at a time when the British military have been permanently engaged in high profile operations abroad which have registered strongly in the public consciousness. Added to this is the prominence of military personnel on the television in shows such as X Factor, anniversaries of major 20th century conflicts, and the work of charities such as Help for Heroes.

In this context, the Her Majesty's (HM) Armed Forces action figures – directly licensed by the UK Ministry of Defence, and launched in 2009 during a time of concerted effort to raise the profile of the British Army amongst the public - provided a team of researchers, led by Dr Tara Woodyer at the University of Portsmouth, with a unique opportunity to investigate both the entanglement of the defence and entertainment industries and how children's interaction with military toys relates to the wider cultural and geopolitical context. As Woodyer notes, 'focusing on the military action figure allows us to historicise this entanglement and ask important questions about children's engagement with the cultures of militarism that characterise our contemporary geopolitical

climate, how they develop political identities and the processes contributing to the shaping of the young citizen'.

CHILDREN AS ACTIVE CONSUMERS

The 'war play debate' is a well established discussion amongst experts in child psychology and development. The emphasis there is on whether war play is good for children, or perhaps damaging in some way. As Woodyer notes, 'Studies have been dominated by a narrow focus on toy guns, classroom based observational approaches and an overriding concern with appropriate child development. This is problematic as studies fail to address the wider play cultures and geopolitical climates in which war play is embedded, and the importance of war play for the player in the here and now'. The team working on this project are geographers rather than child development researchers, and take an entirely different approach, looking at how children interact with these toys without making judgements as to whether this play is somehow inappropriate or harmful.

Moreover, their new methodological approach allows children to take the reins when it comes to their play, rather than playing a pre-designed game in an

arguably artificial context. In Woodyer and her team's study, children were given the freedom to include other toys alongside action figures, to play in the familiar family home environment, to interact directly with the recording equipment, and to act as anything other than typical subjects in a laboratory experiment. In this way, the research environment fits with the subject of its study, as Woodyer notes: 'Children are active consumers in war play. They don't simply mimic basic ideas about conflict, but play around with rules, roles and moral values. They use war toys in ways that we might not expect and are very creative in the different influences they pull together in their play'.

FUTURE CITIZENS

War play is shaped by geopolitical realities, but in turn shapes the 'real' world outside the world of play itself. As Woodyer points out, 'War toys and war play should be of interest beyond concerns with childhood, and to a much broader range of people than developmental psychologists and educationists'. The way children play with toys in general, and war toys in particular, goes far beyond simply mirroring the adult



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world, with its complex political and cultural identities, and rehearsing geopolitical conflicts.

By bringing war toys into the domestic sphere, children sanitise aspects of conflict, and sustain geopolitical logics and established situations. As Woodyer notes, 'It is precisely play's banal and taken for granted nature that allows it this unquestioned role in wider geopolitical cultures. These ideas about war and conflict get domesticated into family routines and habits of thinking, helping to shape political identities.' At the same time, children playing around with roles and moral values helps to shape them as young citizens who will go on to play a part in civil society and politics. The interactive nature of play provides a rich field of potential discovery for the researchers. 'As adults we have to remember that children do not treat toys as we might do, as static objects suspended in time that are designed to communicate particular messages to passive minds', Woodyer points out.

The research – which took place in the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum of Childhood in London, who are a project partner, as well as in schools and homes – demonstrated above all the imaginative, creative and unpredictable nature of children's war play. The children, aged between 5 and 11, worked and reworked the geopolitical roles and associations of their toys, experimenting with roles and values. Current and historical conflicts appeared as themes in the children's play, intermingled with each other and with popular cultural references from film and television. In the museum portion of the research, children were able to step outside the immediate play arena and distinguish clearly between reality and imagined worlds, as Woodyer recalls: 'They were able to express various reasons why they like war

play - including pleasure of movement and use of imagination - at the same time as articulating the many reasons why war is terrible and something they don't want to experience.' Contrary to many cultural expectations, there were no notable differences between girls' and boys' war play.

LEARNING RESOURCES

The team, which aside from Woodyer also includes Dr Sean Carter from the University of Exeter, UK, who works on geopolitics, popular culture and visuality, and Professor Klaus Dodds of Royal Holloway, University of London, UK, whose expertise lies in the field of critical geopolitics and security, media/popular culture and international governance, is disseminating its research in prominent academic and public channels. As well as contributing to two books, *Geographies of Children and Young People* (Springer 2015) and *Children, Young People and Critical Geopolitics* (Ashgate 2016), and peer reviewed journals, the team are successfully engaging a wider audience.

The team's partnership with the V&A Museum of Childhood has positioned them perfectly to reach stakeholders such as educators, parents and children, and contribute to the ongoing debate about war play. Amongst other contributions, the team collaborated with outreach workers to help them develop resources about the relationship between fantasy and reality in war play. More is in the pipeline: 'We are currently working on a wider range of school learning resources that use action figures to think about issues concerning war, conflict and global relations', notes Woodyer. The other main future direction is geographical expansion, with hopes for further work in other European countries.

Project Insights

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PROJECT PARTNER

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PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR BIO

Dr Tara Woodyer is a Geographer at the University of Portsmouth, UK. She received her PhD in Human Geography from the University of London, and held a Visiting Scholar position in the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University, USA. Over the last 12 years, Tara has successfully secured a series of ESRC funding awards to research children, play and toys. She serves on the committee of the Royal Geographical Society's Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group.

PROJECT BLOG

The project maintains an informative and accessible blog at <https://ludicgeopolitics.wordpress.com>, which will be expanded and moved to playingwithtoys.org next summer.



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