The Superhero: a good or bad influence for children

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> Which is morally more questionable: a character that is unashamedly bad, or a character that does good by doing bad things?

This last week has provided an example of confusion and contradiction that links the way children learn, what they choose to do in their own time, and what influence this has on their playing.

A paper presented to the American Psychological Association by Dr. Sharon Lamb of the University of Massachusetts-Boston concludes that modern superheroes do not provide positive role models for children. It describes the superheroes of today as either 'aggressive' or as 'slackers' and expresses concerns over the influence such traits may have on children and young people.[1] In the same week a study for the Canadian Council on Learning concludes that comic books have an important role in encouraging children and young people to read and finds positives in the superhero figures they contain. This is despite their finding that, "... comic books are still considered unsuitable reading material by many educators ..."[2]

At first glance these stories may seem largely complementary rather than contradictory particularly as the American paper concludes, "There is a big difference in the movie superhero of today and the comic book superhero of yesterday". Both also agree that the use of comic book heroes in learning has positive elements but a contradiction appears when one compares this view of the silver screen hero with the comic book version.

There seems to be a feeling that it is not the superhero character *per se* that is to blame here but rather the modern interpretations placed upon them by filmmakers and writers – in other words, the superheroes of the past are superior to those of today. But this view ignores two pertinent facts which are neatly highlighted in the 1989 film *Batman* by Tim Burton.[3] Burton's film was criticised by some as concentrating too much on the 'bad' character of the Joker at the expense of the 'good' Batman. This misses the point that children seem equally interested in the upstanding moral superhero *and* the actions of the 'super villains' that their heroes battle against – exploring being 'bad' seems to hold a fascination for children. Burton's characterisation of the Batman also returned him to his earlier incarnations which, far from being the camp crime fighter of the Adam West 1960s TV era, was from his earliest appearance a crime fighter with overtones.[4]

This second contradiction is in confusing the superhero with the anti-hero: the hero figure that could be described as doing right but in the wrong way. And therein lays the problem. Which is morally more questionable: a character that is unashamedly bad, or a contradictory character that does good by doing bad things? Lamb's paper would seem to require including the confusion inherent in the anti-hero with the morally questionable and thus it becomes a negative influence. In this context the paper seems to suggest that it is the Joker who holds the moral high ground and that can't be right, can it?[5]

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[1] http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/08/macho-stereotype-unhealthy.aspx (15 Aug 2010) [accessed 16 Aug 2010]

[2] http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6054160 (13 Aug 2010) [accessed 16 August 2010]

[3] *Batman*, 1989 [film] Directed by Tim Burton. USA: Polygram

[4] *Detective Comics* no. 27 (May 1939) USA: DC Comic

[5] See the article, 'Anti-heroes: can there be a goodness of purpose?' by Dr. Brian Kinnaird for more on the moral dilemma of the anti-hero http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-hero-in-you/201006/anti-heroes-can-there-be-goodness-purpose (3 Jun 2010) [accessed 16 Aug 2010]

Wolverine, one of the X-Men characters can be seen regularly in the playing of today's children in the children's centre, on the school playground and in the after-school club. He is clearly an anti-hero as is the slightly older character the Incredible Hulk.[6] The modern cinematic interpretations of these relatively modern characters differ little from their originals. But the same is also true of the Spiderman (first appeared 1962), Batman (1939), Conan the Barbarian (1932) and Zorro (1919) all of whom can also be seen in the play of today's children. Anti-heroes one and all. There are fictional characters of the present and the past that are superheroes in the true sense of the word but now, as in older story traditions such the Norse Sagas and the Greek legends and mythology, the moral hero is far outnumbered by the anti-hero. Cinematic interpretation is not the issue: who could argue that the silver screen Robin Hood is in any real way different from the Robin Hood of folk legend?

The real issue here seems to rest on 'questionable morals' and concerns over consequences. This is certainly the anxiety expressed by those childcare and teaching professionals who impose bans on superhero play, war toys and weapons in their settings.[7] In my own experience of working in such settings I have heard this concern used as the justification for banning playing that involve characters as varied as Iron Man, Orcs and Hobbits, the Darleks, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Danger Mouse – and the Smurfs.

This moral concern is not restricted to modern times either. The Batman, amongst other superheroes of his day, has been the butt of criticism at various times throughout our yesterdays. Frederic Wertham, for example, wrote in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) of the negative influence of the comic book saying that children imitated the crimes committed in them. But then again Wertham also said of Batman that, "[this] type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies."[8] His book and the outcry that followed it led largely to the introduction of the Comic Code later the same year – a Code which included the stipulation that all comic stories would ensure that, "in every instance good shall triumph over evil"[9].

Wertham's comments about 'children imitating crime' hit the nail on the head. His implication was that by exposing children and young people to the morally questionable this would create the confusion that Lamb see's in her paper and this confusion would lead to them recreating such acts for real, unable to see them as 'wrong'.

But this is to ignore the fact that children can, and do, understand the differences between the 'real' and the 'not real' when playing and can do so from an early age.[10] It is this ability that allows children to be able to make sense of the very concept of 'good' by 'exploring the 'bad' through their playing. This is the root of their fascination with the anti-hero.

I wonder if there would be the same moral panic if children were seen including anti-hero characters from 'quality' rather than popular culture in their playing? How would we react to children adopting such characters in their games as George Orwell's Winston from *1984* or the Whisky Priest in Graeme Green's *The Power and the Glory*? Would it be better if classic characters such the Greek Perseus of the founding myths of the *Dodekatheon*

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[6]   The Hulk made his first appearance in the Marvel Comic *The Incredible Hulk* no. 1 (May 1962). Wolverine first appeared as an adversary of the Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* no. 181 (November 1974)

[7]   See for example http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/childcare-centres-ban-superheros/story-e6freo8c-1225698502212 (7 Apr 2010) [accessed 16 Aug 2010]

[8]   Fredric Wertham (1954, reprint 1972) *Seduction of the innocent.* New York: Kennikat Press.

[9]   See for example http://www.thecomicbooks.com/cca1954.html (undated) [16 Aug 2010]

[10]   See for example chapter 9, 'Child Phantasmagoria', in Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press. To read more about the research perspective on the moral and practical consequences of children playing superhero, war play and with toy weapons see Judith Rich Harris (1998) *The Nurture Assumption*. London: Bloomsbury; and Penny Holland (2003) *We don't play with guns here: war, weapon and superhero play in the early years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. For a historical perspective on the characters in children's pretend play see chapter 12, 'Pretending Games', in Iona and Peter Opie (1969) *Children's games in street and playground*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

found their way in to the play of the modern British child? Well, watch this space because the 2010 film *Clash of the Titans* is likely to bring the fallible Perseus to a playground near you very soon (if he has not appeared already).[11] And watch out because you can guarantee that his arch foe the Kraken will be there too ... and in co-starring role.

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[11]   *Clash of the Titans*, 2010 [film] Directed by Louis Leterrier. USA: Legendary Pictures.