

Toy Guns and Robbers: real or un-real (PART 1 of 2)

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Playmobil, the German based toy manufacturer, have produced a new play set.¹ And the Daily Mirror is outraged. The official name of the set is the 'Bank with Safe' set in which "Money can be drawn from the functional ATM/cash machine." But The Mirror, and a number of other media outlets, have described the set as a 'Bank Raid Toy Set' in which "Gun-toting action figures mean four year olds can act out bank robbery."²

Moral outraged was expressed - from a newspaper that on the same day's online front page showed, in addition to this story, a photograph of the heavily pregnant Coleen Rooney in a bikini, a story headlined, "Rihanna's two fingers to Grammys rules as she shows her nipples", and "Cole scores!" The story of Ashley Cole's latest "topless bisexual nymphomaniac" girlfriend.

Methodists the Daily Mirror protests too much. But there is a serious point here as some have expressed concern over the fact that this set includes a robber figure and this character has a gun.

The concern over war, weapon and superhero play is nothing new but it has clearly taken on a new direction since the tragedy of Sandy Hook Elementary School. There have been a number of high profile cases in recent weeks in which children have been reproached, or worse, for playing with toy weapons in US schools and kindergartens.³

Even aside from the obviously highlighted fears resulting from Sandy Hook though it seems a given that play which involves violent themes and imaginary or toy weapons simply must be a bad thing. But the reality of the situation is not as clear cut as that. The 'gun' in this Playmobil set is 'not real'. That may sound like an obvious point and people may be tempted to add, 'Well, yes but that's not really the point'. But it is. It is very much the point.

In a Vygotskyian⁴ context the toy gun is a prop or a prompt that allows for a particular situation to occur in a given play episode. Below the age of about three children cannot conceptually make use of one prop to replace a real object unless it very closely resembles the intended object. A Hobby-Horse, which is essentially just a stick with a horse's head on, can be 'a horse' and be played with as such but take the head away and all very young children see is a stick.

This changes over time and the point at which one object *can* successfully represent another is an important conceptual point in human development and it leads to an explosion in the development of increasingly complex skills. More importantly, once children reach this point they also become surprisingly good at making a distinction between what is real and what is not. More so than is obvious at first sight.

The psychologist Paul L. Harris, who has specialised in exploring children's understanding of reality, points out that, "Young children appear to have a firm grasp of the distinction between fantasy and reality."⁵ Which explains how when children play (even very young children) they are capable of moving repeatedly from the real to the un-real and back again, continuously.

¹ http://www.playmobil.co.uk/on/demandware.store/Sites-GB-Site/en_GB/Product-Show?pid=5177&cgid

² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/anti-gun-campaigners-speak-out-against-1647354>

³ See for example <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2013/02/5-year-old-boy-threatened-with-suspension-over-lego-toy-gun/> and also

<http://www.infowars.com/discussion-about-toy-nerf-gun-causes-lockdown-at-bronx-elementary-schools/>

⁴ Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, Russian Social Psychologist (1896-1934)

⁵ Johnson, Carl. N., and Paul L. Harris (1994) Magic: Special but not excluded. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 12:35-51

This is a very difficult one for we adults to empathise with fully simply because we *are* adults. Our brains work in a very different way and despite the fact that we have all been young children ourselves it is incredibly difficult for us to put ourselves into the same mind-set that they are experiencing in this continuous liminal movement – more often than not we don't even see the joins between the different states.

This is also why it is not enough for adults to just explain reality in a real world context to children – to make sense of our type of reality children must do so in their own way and that means playing it through in their own non-adult reality to make it work. This is where the friction can arise between the seemingly obvious view that toy guns must be harmful in the long-term and the objective view that in the vast majority of play episodes they are not. Because they are 'not real' in the sense that we understand 'real'.

As Brian Sutton-Smith, probably the world's leading play theorist, observes,

"Life in the ludic (the playful) lane can never be understood simply in terms of that which it interprets realistically, the so-called real world. It must also be about mockery as well as mimicry . . . Children know that they are manipulating their thoughts about reality, not reality itself; and they know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self".⁶

To learn what, if any role toy weapons might have in children's play requires understanding them in the context of being a prop. Pointing a toy gun at another individual and saying 'Bang, bang' is not about violence and aggression: it is using a prop that allows children to explore the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad. Children cannot explore a concept like this without there being props that signify 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'. It is the interplay between the two that allows exploration and understanding to occur.

This is the point of the toy gun and it is easy to see how important this is to them in the fact that children cannot stop themselves, even at the risk of adult displeasure, from making toy guns from Lego, sticks and even their fingers in order to explore this.

In the case of the Playmobil 'Bank with Safe' set it only really makes sense when seen alongside one of the other play sets in their new range - 'The Police Station with Alarm System' for which the blurb on the company's website says,

"There's a criminal on the loose, but don't worry - the alarm system will catch him. Help the police catch and interrogate the bad guy with the help of the Playmobil police station, complete with a working alarm system. With a realistic police station at your command, you can set the scene for an exciting chase and capture. A real working alarm system with a flashing light is set off when it detects movement, and there are three police officers for teaming up to find the bad guy.

"Once he's been caught, take him to the interrogation room for questioning and hold him in police custody in the barred cell overnight. With over fifty accessories, there's hours of fun to be had with the Playmobil alarmed police station."⁷

This duality of the real/not-real world clearly works and it would be easy to test this by putting these two play sets together. If that were to happen it would be the robber with the gun that would land up in jail because it is the robber that is the baddy and the playing child would work that out all for themselves.

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⁶ Sutton-Smith, Brian (1997) *The ambiguity of play*. London: Harvard University Press.

⁷ http://www.playmobil.co.uk/on/demandware.store/Sites-GB-Site/en_GB/Product-Show?pid=5182&cgid=

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This paper is part 1 of a 2 part piece. See also 'Toy Guns and Robbers: real or un-real PART 2' (February 2013).

All web references last accessed 11th February 2013.

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