

Strategies of Social Screen Play(ers) across the Ecosystem of Play: Toys, games and hybrid social play in technologically mediated playscapes

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[digital culture](#) [games](#) [gamification](#) [hybrid](#) [material culture](#) [play](#) [play industry](#) [social media](#) [technology](#)
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Contemporary play(fulness) manifests itself as multimedial cultures of production, distribution, consumption and use. In the core of the ecosystem of contemporary play are the play industries, the play products, the creative and productive players and technologies, which all play important roles in shaping ludic behavior. Today, a significant part of play practices are in one way or another connected with different screens: technology together with social media platforms enables players to share their play in online environments in ways that were unimaginable in times when toy and game enthusiasts communicated mostly through hobbyist conventions, newsletters and fanzines.

Through various screens, players carry out different play patterns related to e.g. photoplay or videography made of toys and games. Player created content influences the industries of play by directing companies to build marketing strategies and actual products that in one way or another capture and capitalize on the essential elements that have made social media popular – its capability to engage users in circulating visual, audio-based and animated play content.

Developers and designers of various play experiences (material, digital or their combinations – hybrids/phygitals) operate with concepts such playability and play value in order to give form to products and applications that are able to invite their users to meaningful ludic activities. One of the elements that build play value is the social aspect of play experiences. At the same time, there is a lack of conceptual tools for measuring social play value for products that are simultaneously situated, used and experienced in physical, digital (and in-between) environments and as a part of either/both material artefacts and digitally enhanced or augmented play worlds. The first step in this direction is to map out the strategies of social screen players across the ecosystem of play. In

order to understand the constituents of social play value, this review aims to investigate the ways in which social screen play operates across the networked ecosystem of contemporary play. By reviewing practices of the play industry and comparing them with current play patterns shared on social media, the author builds a foundation for understanding the building blocks of the ecosystem of contemporary play and the various strategies its actors are presenting in terms of screen-based play patterns. Through a small-scale analysis conducted on the screen-based media of Flickr, YouTube and Kickstarter with search words game(s), toy(s) and hybrid social play applied in each, the author then cross-examines how what is considered valuable in terms of play products parallel each other between the actors of the ecosystem of contemporary play: the current makers, users and potential future players involved in the ecosystem.

Foreplay: Investigating play in the ludic age

As proposed by scholars such as Sutton-Smith (1997), Combs (2000) and Raessens (2006), we have entered an era of the ludic turn in which playfulness is taking centre stage. In the ludic society, the playing of games in particular, is perceivable both online and offline. For many players, the focus is on fun, entertainment and pleasure but the age of the ludic turn manifests as well in game and toy-related skill-building, self-realization and other forms of creative behavior (see e.g. Heljakka 2015b). The age of the ludic turn also parallels an “age of convergence where all things and all people can play with and interpret objects in different ways through different media” (Geraghty 2014, 117).

In the *ecosystem of contemporary play*, several actors are present. In this review these actors include the production, the products, the technologies and the players. The production of play includes the traditional toy industry, the entertainment industry (with the digital games industry), and the independent toy makers such as – art and design cultures present e.g. on etsy.com, and handicrafts.[\[1\]](#)

The products of play refer to *playthings*: toys, games and hybrids toyified games or gamified toys, technologically enhanced 3D toys or toys/games with an interactive, digital component,[\[2\]](#) and thematically hybrid play products, the so called mash-ups, which may be represented in either physical, digital or phygital format. I will, in the context of this review, use the terms plaything, toys and game interchangeably, as they all stand for the objects of play.

Zagalo and Branco (2015, 13) define toys as objects designed for the act of play. They write: “Toys categorize any kind of artefact that allows people to interact with, not necessarily with a purpose, but able to reward the interaction or simply stimulate fun”. According to my research (e.g. Heljakka 2013) the importance of the material dimension of play is not diminishing although Western culture is digitalising and de-materialising in many ways (see e.g. Heljakka 2012b, Mäyrä et al., 2014). In other words, physical (tangible) toys and games are still popular among different age groups. However, at the same time, digital culture and the development of new technologies have contributed to the user cultures related to object play.

Alongside the *toyification of games* and the *gamification* of both toys and toy play (Heljakka 2012b, 2013, 2015a) it is also the playscapes that have expanded from the intimacy of player’s living environments and occasional physical sites for ludic interaction to multiplatform play. The platforms for play employed in this review include the material, digital and socially mediated playgrounds of which this review employs Flickr, YouTube and Kickstarter as case examples of media platforms enabling social screen play.

In the ecosystem of contemporary play sketched out here, technology, besides the so called “connected toys” (physical toys with a connection to digital playscapes) refers to the devices for play that extend the use of toys and games into areas that alongside play have other functional purposes. Examples are mobile technologies such as smart phones, tablets and cameras, which enhance play in ways that enable social sharing of the ludic activities.

Finally, there are the users and their cultures of play – the players. Earlier toy research, especially interested in mature forms of play, has not paid much attention to the player perspective (Heljakka 2013, 24). In my own studies, I have aimed to bring the creative cultures of adult play into spotlight by pointing out how e.g. digital culture and social media platforms have encouraged adult players to “come out of their toy closets” and to enter the social sphere of play (Ibid.). The “coming out” discourse in the context of play is largely enabled by developments in media environments. Hellekson and Busse (2006, 14) point out how fans have migrated to new spaces as they have become available, and this is in part the result of fans’ use of tools. The internet may be considered one of the key tools in this process: For example, as Garlen (2014, 129) notes, the internet has become a dominant tool for communication and public display. The AFOL’s, or adult fans of LEGO have become more visible to the world at large, and millions of people around the globe can see and appreciate their efforts building on creations shared on social media.

Paul Booth discusses playfulness within media systems from the viewpoint of consumption: “As consumers of media, we play with the texts, meanings, and values created by media industries” (2015, 1). Players not only consume toys, games and hybrids, but also made visible via social media, actively contribute to the development of play patterns which might not even have been considered by the designers and producers of play. Thus, the creative and productive play acts of users constantly develop play culture. When shared on social media, the play acts become *invitations to play* for other potential users of toys, games etc. Simultaneously, by showcasing ones play – playthings and type of interaction with them online – the player comes to contribute to the preservation of *play knowledge* (Heljakka 2015a), in this case valuable information about the multifaceted play patterns related to object play rooted in the use of physical playthings but with a possible connection to other tools and playscapes beyond the physical manipulation and interactions between the player and the plaything.

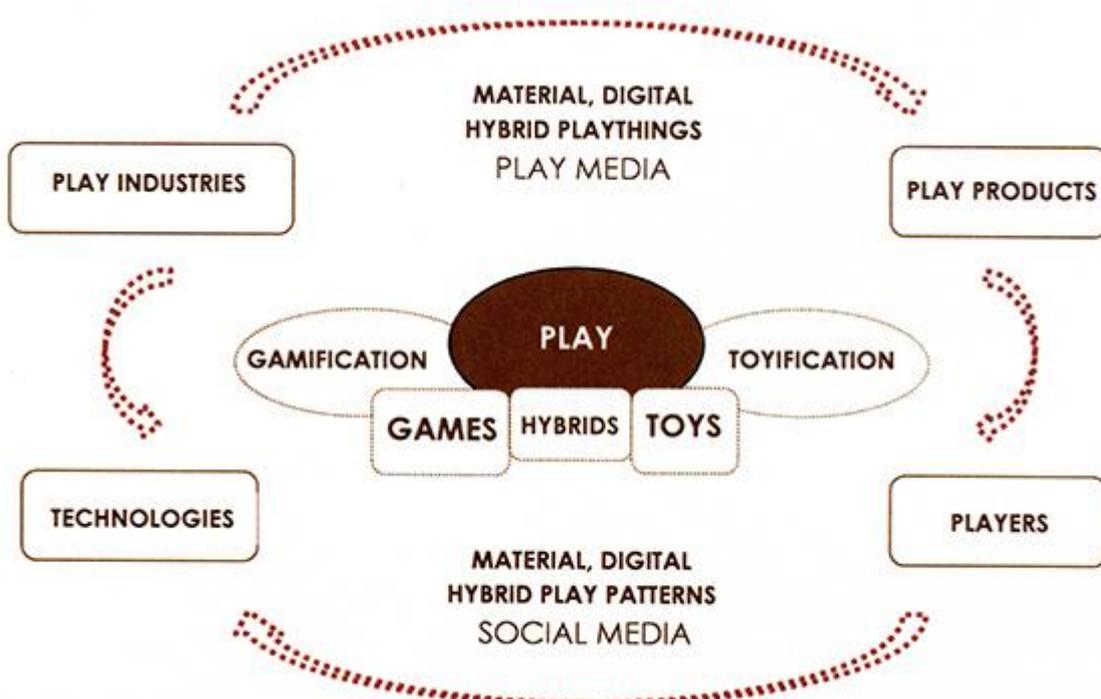


Figure 1. The ecosystem of contemporary play: A visualization of linked players and platforms (Heljakka, 2016).

Toys and screen time: Developments in play

Media has come to have a great impact on the play industries and therefore, it is a factor that shapes play culture. Today, interest has shifted from traditional television to other screen-based media, in many cases forms enabled and accessible by mobile technologies. In today’s ecosystem of play, the notion of “screen zombies”, (especially among children as players), interested only in passive

consumption of *screen-based play-related content*, which in TIA's (Toy Industry Association) trend report are referred to as "truly 360-degree interactive play experiences", seems like a one-sided take on the subject. For example, some apps encourage social interaction and social media platforms like YouTube provide sites for dynamic, dialogical interaction between players and play "material".

Moreover, it is notable, how technologies such as smart phones and other devices including cameras not only provide access points to contemporary playscapes, but also function as toys themselves. In other words, technology lets players extend the play patterns associated with traditional, three-dimensional and physical toys to digital and social playscapes. The nature of contemporary object-based play is thus *hybrid play*.

Adults, as well as children are simultaneously playing with their toys and technological devices including cameras not only in public spaces such as urban environments (e.g. tourist sites and monuments) and natural surroundings, but in the intimacy of built play environments such as doll houses and dioramas in domestic spheres. Furthermore, photoplay, once shared online on Flickr, Facebook or Instagram, and videographed, animated play as shared mainly on YouTube, functions as evidence and documentation of the otherwise ephemeral (e.g. Montola 2012) object play activity.

Furthermore, although play including traditional toys only still exists, it is notable how researchers interested in the phenomenon of contemporary play are at this time able to witness how players appropriate technologies and social media in order to present their play activities to possible *audiences* enjoying the play of others as *spectators*, *participants* and *social players*. The nature of contemporary object-based and screen-oriented play is thus not only remarkably *hybrid*, but also *social play*.

Screening the play industries: Production of contemporary play

The traditional toy industry entails the producers of all kinds of physical toys including board games. The area of the digital game industry^[3] falls more clearly either under the electronics industry, or the entertainment sector. However, as I have argued elsewhere, concerning the hybrid qualities of many new toys and games, it would be more appropriate to address the producers of play content, may it be presented in a material, digital or hybrid format as the *play industry* or alternatively as the *industries of play* (Heljakka 2013).

Instead of referring to the actors involved on the production and retail side of the ecosystem of play as manufacturers and buyers of playthings, the Toy Industry Association (TIA) discusses the parties involved in production and distribution as “global play professionals”, some of which 30,600 took part in the New York Toy fair in February 2016. This presents a 16% growth in attendance compared to 2015. Toys, as a product category grew 6.7% in terms of sales compared to 2014 (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016).

Most of the mass-produced playthings provided for the global audience by the industries of play come (design and marketing-wise) from the U.S., Europe or Japan. In terms of production, the manufacturing of physical play products is still largely based in Asia, although a perceivable trend of the past few years has demonstrated that toy companies have an interest in returning parts of their production back to e.g. U.S. and Europe.

Nevertheless, online platforms such as social media services are inherently globally inclusive and therefore interesting for companies operating physically from different corners of the world. Social media marketing of toys especially has become evident during the past decade: Most of the companies within the industries of play host e.g. YouTube channels of their own, showcasing commercials of toys and games in dynamic and reciprocal ways that were not possible at the time when only printed media marketing and television commercials existed.

The change in the media landscape has also resulted in increased amount of information displayed about toy design and small or independent toy companies: It is important to point out here how individual toy developers and inventors are much more known to the general public than ever before in the history of commercial toy making. It is through social media they are able to present their own design histories and to interact with the players interested in not only the products they innovated and designed, but also how their personal stories may have contributed to the beginnings of what has later evolved into transmedially and transgenerationally recognised play phenomena. Therefore, it is easier than ever before for players to connect and communicate with independent toy designers who are present on social media. Today, fandom for toys or games often leads to a fandom directed to the designers that created these playthings. Global toy giants also utilise spokespersons who communicate with (adult) players. One example of such is e.g. [Matty Collector](#) at Mattel.

To sum up, the social aspect of screen play is interesting for any producer of play content as it helps the word-of-mouth to circulate and reach masses much faster than before. Geraghty (2014, 161)

notes that sites such as eBay, shop websites and fan-made pages offer the potential for unlimited archives of images, knowledge and other digital ephemera. At the same time, the possibility that players have to enjoy this content is valued for many other reasons: E.g. YouTube may be considered the *world's largest toy catalogue* at the moment, offering not only information about new releases and popular playthings, but a source of inspiration and enjoyment which may be participated through dialogue as spectators or more interactively as active players and providers of new content.

YouTube offers players content of many kinds: One part of this information comes from the industries of play and another is based on player activities. Commercial (product-oriented and person-oriented) information on toys and games comes from the companies involved in the play industries. Players post unboxing videos, play tests and tutorials and simply videos showing people playing games (Let's play -videos), with various playthings and with each other. The videography on YouTube seems to have many functions as videos relating to games and play communicate information on play patterns, showcase innovativeness in suggesting new play possibilities and finally – invite to (social) play, As such, it is a source of both entertainment and play knowledge. Further, it allows the play industries a pathway to engage in a dialogue with the actual users of its products, the transgenerational audiences interested in play and various materials related to it (see Figure 2).

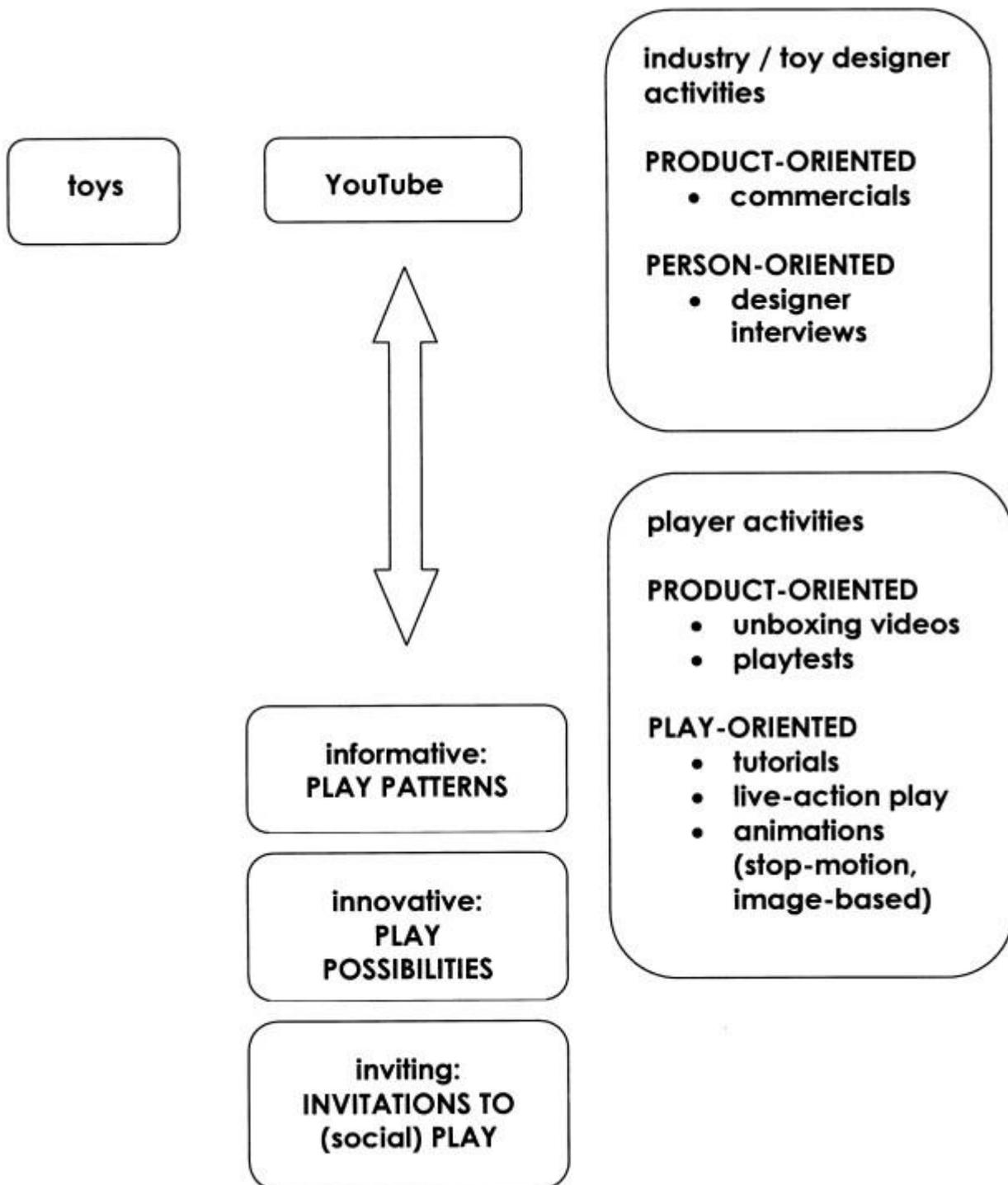


Figure 2. Toy-related videos as presented on YouTube have multiple functions connected to screen-play.

Toying with technology: Emerging trends in technologically enhanced play material

As presented, the ecosystem of contemporary play evolves thanks to developments in social media services. Another dimension of the ecosystem of contemporary play is technology and its

developments in in physical, digital and hybrid strategies of content production. In the following, some of the key strategies are scrutinized.[\[4\]](#)

3D printing

...3D printers are not just a tool: they are a new communications platform. Home fabrication technology isn't just a powerful tool: it's also a medium (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2015, 214).

Utilisation of possibilities with 3D printing have to some degree, been explored by toy companies like Hasbro and MakieLab. As 3D printing machines become more accessible, players have increasing possibilities to print their own play materials like small toys (figurines and accessories), board game pieces and such. In order to both open up the possibilities for players to use the technology and at the same time confine their use to popular characters, e.g. Hasbro has announced that it will allow users of this emerging technology to customize some of their characters based on licence properties (Hasbro press release 2014).

MakieLab, has designed the world's first mass-marketed, 3D printed action doll type, the MakieDoll. The idea behind this plaything is the freedom given to players to (again, to some degree) design their own doll character online by choosing its skin, hairdo and eye colour, personalising its facial features (shape of eyes, mouth etc.) and giving it a chosen outfit and then choosing whether one wants the action doll just to have a digital presence on MakieLab's website or if the player wants to have it 3D printed and delivered to oneself as a physical plaything. The MakieDoll exemplifies a trend in toy making envisioned by Lauwaert already in 2009: "Players do not play with a toy designed behind closed doors but become co-designers of their own toys" (Lauwaert 2009, 8).

In the case of MakieLab, the company has not only managed to combine the idea of DIY toy-making culture with a commercial product, but also capitalised on a key trend in contemporary doll cultures – a player's desire to personalise the plaything into e.g. an avatarial mini-version (see e.g. Heljakka 2012a) of themselves.

On top of partly customisable playthings, the play industry already offers 3D printing kits. E.g. the 3D printer kit by Fischertechnik GmbH allows the player to "learn the basics and gain an insight into this revolutionary technology with high future potential" (Trend Report on the 67th

Spielwarenmesse 2016, 3). Printers produced by ToyBox are according to the company [website](#) “created with kids in mind” [...] “exposing them to next-generation technology”. At New York toy fair, Popular Science was awarded the Best of Toy Fair 2016 for their Piecemaker 3D printer as a (Scott 2016).

It is not only small toy companies which have capitalised on the trend of 3D printing: Mattel revived its retro ThingMaker toy into a 3D printer at New York Toy Fair 2016 (Burke 2016). Mattel’s product retails at \$299 and another device, [XYZprinting’s Da Vinci Jr. 1.0](#), aimed at homes and schools, retails for \$330 (Ghoshal 2016).



Video 1. Mattel Thingmaker: 3D printer in action. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e82-9gLg-K8>.

The emergence of 3D printers presented as toys *in themselves*, presents a case of *toyification of technology*. As such, it exemplifies the blurring of boundaries between producers and users of play content – in this case physical, three-dimensional playthings.

Whether creating figures such as dolls, robots and dinosaurs, or wearable accessories like bracelets and necklaces, Mattel’s ThingMaker, according to the company newsletter, “is the answer for at-home creative play” and hands over the “keys to the toy factory” (Mattel 12.2.2016). Although providing possibilities for players to switch sides to makers in the ecosystem of contemporary play, 3D printing is to be considered more of a possibility than a potential threat to the industries of play. Moreover, what is perhaps even more interesting for the production and consumption side is how

evolving 3D printing technologies may provide future solutions in questions regarding sustainability and e.g. reuse of plastics in toys that have come to the final stages of their lifecycles.

Hybridity through codes and apps

Many play products introduced during the past years include additional components accessible through both QR codes and specially developed apps. These playthings no longer rely solely on technologies utilised as an integral part of the toy or game, i.e. as a technologically enhanced plaything, a “smart toy” (in mechanical terms including e.g. battery-driven operations) used outside of other technologies of play, but are “e-connected toys” (for e-connected, see TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016) specifically dependent on other technological devices and software such as apps.

One example of a simple hybrid play experience operating through screen-based media and built on the idea on playing with photography are the [Studio Pets By Myrna](#). The QR code printed on various physical products with a pet theme take the player to “watch the adorable video clip”. The Studio Pets app, downloadable for free, presents a “photo booth” in which the players may assemble and decorate Polaroid-type photographs of “toyified” pets.

Another example of simple hybridity are the [Shuffle card games](#), targeted at players of different ages, which enable the user to acquaintance oneself with the game mechanics through “animated game guides and extra gameplay for every product” (Shuffle). By using the app that can be downloaded from both Google Play and App Store in combination with the cards of the game, the player uncovers additional content to be used as a part of the game. Scandinavian toy company BRIO’s first launch of a game app, BRIO World – Railway, a closed digital environment, is available for tablet and smartphone devices in February 2016.

The Shuffle cards and the BRIO’s “first ever game app” thus present a case of what I have understood as AGE – as a source of potential *augmented game experiences*.^[5] Both of the examples are based on physical playthings, but present different types of play patterns, as the first offers hybrid social play experiences and the second an “open-ended play philosophy” recognised in BRIO’s Railway building system. As a closed digital environment, BRIO’s app is more akin to a creative platform than an actual game. Despite its lack of a social dimension, the app seems to present a case of hybrid play tying together the possibilities of screen-based technologies (digital play) with a play value based on physical play patterns with the original, three-dimensional BRIO Railway toy. Francisca Kertzsch, Head of Marketing at BRIO, articulates:

When entering the digital world it was very important for us to keep the same feeling and values that people recognize and associate with BRIO from the analogue world.

“Apps that allow kids to play with physical toys in new and different ways” is a direction detected by the toy trend analysts at TIA as well. TIA (Toy Industry Association) has identified five key trends in toys prior to the latest New York Toy Fair, in February 2016: Tech: Drones, robots and toys-to-life, Family matters, Ultimate Creator, Brain boosters/STEAM and Coveted collectibles. According to the Tech trend, “The Toys-To-Life mash up innovative and affordable technology with traditional toys to provide a truly 360-degree interactive play experience. As tech continues to innovate, we are seeing the enchantment of classic play patterns, in many different toys and categories” (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016).

Virtual and Augmented Reality

VR (Virtual reality) and AR (Augmented reality) represent more complex technologies that are dependent on the use of screens. An example of VR technologies applied to toy marketing is LEGO’s 3D toy catalogue with built-in, animated tutorials which can be activated by using a free app or codes printed on either packaging or directly on the product accessible through scanning with a smartphone (LEGO catalogue Januar-Juni 2016). LEGO Nexo Knights is another example of a “play world that combines physical and virtual experience” (Trend Report on the 67th Spielwarenmesse 2016, 4). Again, the virtual experience is communicated through a game app.



Video 2. Lego Augmented Reality manual. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=609RIVGcXyw>.

Another example of VR in reference to a well-known toy concept is the View-Master Virtual Reality viewer. According to Mattel's Press Information booklet distributed at the Nuremberg toy fair in January 2016, the View Master VR that works with Google Cardboard, is a downloadable app, as in the LEGO case:

This innovative system will open your eyes to the world of virtual reality. Simply download one of the free View-Master apps to your compatible smartphone (not included). Then slide your smartphone into the viewer and place the Preview Reel in front of you. A 3-D augmented reality menu will appear – digital icons that seem to float above the reel. Make your selection by looking at the one you want to visit, then click the lever to launch yourself through time and space into 360-degree views that completely surround you (Mattel Press Information booklet 2016, also see <http://www.view-master.com/en-us>).



Video 3. Quick tutorial on how to setup Google Cardboard on Mattel View-Master VR Headset. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJ0OCUqbwZM>.

This new version of the View Master allows the player to interact with the environment by pulling up videos, images, fun facts and mini-games (Ibid.) According to analysts at Euromonitor, “virtual reality technology is likely to be focused mostly on gaming applications, as it aims to create an immersive experience that is more suitable for gaming.” (Euromonitor 2016). Moreover, it will be interesting to see, how the envisioned IoT (Internet of Things) will apply to the design, development and use of play products of the future.

Augmented reality technology is going to be a growing part of the internet of things, and aspects of it will be increasingly integrated into mobile platforms, but its impact on gaming will be marginal compared to that of virtual reality. (See [Euromonitor's report.](#))

The main challenge seems not to be the availability of current technologies, but “generating compelling content to make the technology a worthwhile investment for the consumer.” (Euromonitor 2016). One example of such compelling content may be the idea of combining coding and programming language with a physical toy, as is the case with Codie and KosmoBits.

Coding and programming toys

According to the trends report from the Nuremberg toy fair 2016, “Codie is the name of a toy robot by Codie Labs Ltd., Hungary. He is programmed over a computer language for kids, designed on a modular principle and grasped intuitively” (Trend Report on the 67th Spielwarenmesse 2016, 6). The KosmoBits by Franckh-Kosmos Verlags-GmbH & Co. is according to this trend report an “experimenting box”:

Players run a computer game on their tablet PC or smartphone with the help of a wireless game pad and microcontroller – the KosmoDuino. The aim of the game: overcome obstacles, and solve puzzles.



Video 4. Codie the programmable robot toy. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiDB9KW0iRM>.

In TIA's trend report it is argued that "The hottest robots of the year will be customizable and teach kids important concepts, including coding, engineering, problem-solving and building" (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016: Key trends 2016, Tech). The science and engineering kits that teach coding and advanced mathematical concepts are also part of the "Brain boosters/STEAM" trend reported by the organization's trend analysts (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016: Key trends 2016, Brain boosters/STEAM). With emerging technologies, players seem to gain more agencies in defining functions for their playthings. Through different screens they are able to co-design their play objects and at the same time, learn about possibilities of currently available tools of production.

Exploring hybrid and social ludic activities in three mediated playscapes – Flickr, YouTube and Kickstarter

The ecosystem of contemporary play may be explored in the context of mediated playscapes as well. The remainder of the review concentrates on an investigation of three social sites, namely Flickr, YouTube and Kickstarter, and their roles of function for both the industries of play and the players themselves. The main question under examination is how the hybrid, social aspects of play are present(ed) on these platforms.

On its [website](#), Flickr advertises its function as "almost certainly the best online photo management and sharing application in the world", with two goals: First, to help people make their photos available to the people that matter to them and second, to enable new ways of organising photos and video. According to a search conducted in February 2016 using the tag words 'toys', 'games' and 'play', a multitude of images could be found for each category. For toys, Flickr suggested 5,154,529 photographs of different toys, including e.g. photoplay on character toys (toy photography of dolls, action figures and soft toys staged in indoor and outdoor play scenarios). For games, the first sample display of altogether 8,425,432 photographs of games showed images of traditional game elements such as chess pieces and dice. For 'play', Flickr suggested 7,630,851 images, including photography of different play objects, e.g. hypersimulated dolls, but also people playing with and without objects.

Although Flickr enables users to upload videos through their application, it is YouTube which is more recognised as a platform for sharing videography. According to its website, YouTube "provides a forum for people to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and acts as a

distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small”. In February 2016[6], some 474,000,000 videos were suggested when searching under the tag word ‘play’ (exact search with tag word in quotation marks 480,000,000 videos), 79,900,000 for ‘games’ (exact search with tag word in quotation marks 80,500,000 videos) and 15,600,000 for ‘toys’ (exact search with tag word in quotation marks 15,900,000 videos).

The result for the combined tag words ‘hybrid game’ included 1,650,000 videos, ‘hybrid toy’ 243,000 videos and ‘social hybrid play’ 341,000 videos (exact search with tag words in quotation marks 3,160 for “hybrid game”, 1,440 for “hybrid toy” and “social hybrid play” 0 videos) see Figure 3.). Based on the volume of toy and game-related content shared on Flickr and YouTube it becomes possible to see how games as a category of play products currently rules over toys. At the same time, based exclusively on the volumes of photographs and videos, hybridity seems to be more of a present feature of games than toys.

Search word(s)	YouTube
Play	474,000,000
“Play”	480,000,000
Social Play	22,500,000
“Social Play”	1,790
Social Hybrid Play	341,000
“Social Hybrid Play”	0
Games	79,900,000
“Games”	80,500,000
Hybrid game	1,650,000
“Hybrid game”	3,160
Toys	15,600,000
“Toys”	15,900,000
Hybrid toy	243,000
“Hybrid Toy”	1,440

Figure 3. Search words in YouTube by February 22. 2016.

Kickstarter states it their mission to “help bring creative projects to life”. Crowdfunding campaigns have benefitted the launch of several play products in the past years. Actions of fans through crowdsourcing media platforms such as Kickstarter provide, according to Botoric, “an important key for understanding the business models of the crowdsourcing as a driver toward value creation” (2015, 167). Previous successful and plaything-related Kickstarter campaigns include the launch of [GoldieBlox](#) toys and the [Exploding Kittens](#) card game. The latter represents an example “that made Kickstarter history”;

What is this? This is the card game that made Kickstarter history. Created by Matthew Inman (The Oatmeal), and Shane Small (Xbox, Marvel), Exploding Kittens made history when it became the most-backed game in Kickstarter history and the campaign with the most number of backers, ever ([Exploding Kittens](#) 2016).

What needs to be noted, though, is that the given examples concerning successful campaigns are based on other topical factors than a sole presence in the right crowdfunding platform: The philosophy behind the GoldieBlox toys is largely built around the ideas of empowering young girls to construct and build devices that communicate ideas related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and the Exploding Kittens card game combines two popular themes present in current YouTube videos: cats and explosions.

In a search conducted in February 2016 focusing on hybridity, social play, games and toys, the majority of the projects seeking for funding and tagged with these search words presented card games, board games, social media platforms for gamers and RPGs. In Kickstarter, a search on “play projects in all categories on Earth sorted by magic” gave 9,299 projects and another one on “play projects in all categories on Earth sorted by most funded” gave 3,710 results. To compare, a search on “play projects in design on Earth sorted by most funded” only gave 537 projects, showing perhaps what is of most interest when trying to detect emergent trends in relation to play materials. Projects shown in this category included innovative concepts for play products e.g. play devices for pets (Kittyo and Petcube), Hackaball, “a computer you can throw” and ZipChip, “a new way to play catch”.

Due to the different nature of the strategies of the social media platforms described above, it is possible to see differences in their meanings for the actors in the ecosystem of play. With millions of results photoplay (i.e. toy photography including single images of playthings and continuous ‘toy projects’ representing socially shared and evolving play), photoplay on Flickr comes to represent the established relationships players have to their playthings. YouTube, again, with videography uploaded on the site, represents both the producers and users of playthings and as such, approaches the subject of play from different angles.

According to Geraghty, YouTube “videos provide fans the space to experiment and play with new media technologies, identities, and their own memories” (Geraghty 2014, 88). On YouTube, it is possible to observe up-to-date coverage on new product launches, but it also provides a platform for players to quickly grasp ideas about which toys and games are popular at the moment. If Flickr, in

one way then, exemplifies play materials which have gained a steady foothold in the ecosystem of play, YouTube may be viewed as providing a screen through which we look at both the recent past and the here and now. Kickstarter, again, as a site for showcasing and searching for support for yet unfinished, prototypical ideas for future play material, represents the “Tomorrowland of toys”, games and concepts for hybrid play.

Socially shared screen-play patterns: Transgenerational and transmedial uses of playthings

As noted, besides innovative, professional toy and game design, ideas on play flow from the user cultures to the industry. Player generated content, once displayed on social media, becomes an interesting resource for research. Additionally, it provides the industries of play a platform in which to observe player preferences regarding currently available play materials.

Players of toys, games and hybrids between these play concepts are increasingly social in their patterns of behaviour in terms of choosing, appropriating and sharing both their playthings and the play experiences in relation to these artefacts, applications and services. Technological devices (mobile media) together with social media services as communicational platforms have a significant role in how players acquire information about new play materials and potential wow experiences related to them. The change in communication technologies has resulted in playing with toys being documented with mobile devices while playing.

Further, social media in its various forms also functions as a digital playscape for players to interact socially in terms of meaning making and shared play. Thus, players use social media not only to the activity of play itself but also to distribute documentations and knowledge of play and at the same time formulate understandings of how different playthings convey play value.

In some families, interest in toys and games is transgenerational – playthings are socially shared, objects that enable intrafamilial experiences. The indisputable rise of popularity in use of new media technologies opens up a “shop window” to all kinds of play activities. As there is more and more interest in creating meaningful transgenerational play experiences that are manifested both online and offline, there is a need to develop an understanding of how different age groups can be tempted into social interaction through different playthings in a prominently and technologically mediated digitalising play culture. One way of investigating this is to explore how social play value

is structured, maintained and further enriched in play experiences related to physical playthings, e.g. toys and board games, when they are turned into (or simply enhanced with) digital play experiences while not replacing, but adding value to the original concept.

Aslan Appleman, senior director at Mattel, said [in reference to ThingMaker, a newly launched 3D printer for toy making]: “In today’s digital age, it’s more important than ever for families to transcend the digital world and make their ideas real. [...] “ThingMaker pushes the boundaries of imaginative play, giving families countless ways to customise their toys and let their creativity run wild.” (Burke 2016).

According to TIA’s trend analysts in their annual Key trends report, they are “seeing a growing number of toys that incorporate technology while also promoting socialization, face-to-face interaction, and family bonding for all” (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016: Key trends 2016: Family matters). Furthermore, socialisation plays a part also in another key trend noted by TIA, namely ‘Coveted collectibles’ based on the idea of trading and sharing collectibles:

Collectibles teach children patience and perseverance (due to “the hunt”), organization, and negotiation skills (when it comes to trade). (TIA Newsletter 22 February 2016: Key trends 2016, Coveted Collectibles).

In terms of object play at adult age, collecting is the most popular rhetoric associated with this form of ludic behaviour (see e.g. Heljakka 2013). In other words, when adults interact with playthings, they are most often referred to as *collectors* and not as players. Lincoln Geraghty, who has written about ‘cult collectors’ (2014) in reference to popular media texts, addresses adult toy activities from the viewpoint of fandom:

Collections are the physical artefacts of fan enthrallment with texts of popular culture [...] Collectibles are important physical reminders of the visual experience on screen and as such can be just as important in the processes of celebration and meaning making fans go through when returning to and rewatching their favourite films (Geraghty 2014, 38; 40).

Although the social aspect is clearly present in adult object-oriented play practices in the age of the ludic turn, adult play patterns are tied more to the activity of hunting and to creative and productive forms of play than trading of their play objects (Heljakka 2015b). Central to all of these forms of play is the aspect of sharing the outcomes of play on social media platforms, which as distributed

documentations of play function as evidence for the creative and productive nature of contemporary object-based play.

As demonstrated, mature players with most access points to mobile and social media are in many cases referred to as either collectors, fans or hobbyists and not as players. Botoric writes about fans being recognized as a powerful source for generating new ideas, joining the formerly exclusive domain of marketers, engineers, and designers (Botoric 2015, 167).

LEGO is in many cases a forerunner in enabling (adult) players also recognized as ‘builders’ to participate in hybrid, social play. Geraghty observes how adult fans [!] of LEGO film videos of their displayed collections of rare items and MOCs (known in LEGO language as ‘my own creation’) (Geraghty 2014, 172). Barton (2014, citing Jones 2003, 168) notes how ‘digital and internet technologies facilitate the production and dissemination of high-quality fan-produced texts’. In the case of LEGO the ‘fan texts’ do not only refer to videos, but also static images of creations of transgenerational audiences. According to Garlen, Flickr has also provided a venue for builders to showcase their creations and their skill at composing effective photographs of LEGO scenes (Garlen 2014, 123).

Having realized the amazing number of diverse posts, images, and videos of LEGO creations on numerous online platforms, the LEGO Group celebrated those creations with the ReBrick, a social bookmarking platform where adult users can share, organize and discuss user-created LEGO content (Botoric 2015, 161—162).

Besides visual and material aspects, rooted in physical playthings, socially shared screen-play patterns become popular due to their mimetic qualities. Play memes involving physical playthings such as toy projects, toy tourism and geocaching type of play patterns (with physical toys known to geocaching culture as *travel bugs*) are showcased on social media. (Heljakka 2015a, 2016). They represent other recognised types of adult toy play apart from the more organised AFOL’s in relation to LEGO communities. Again, (digital) memes presented on social media may parody popular characters (in toy culture e.g. characters from the Toy Story film trilogy). Further, they also give a reason for physical (and hybrid) play products to be developed, based on the humorous aspects of conceptual characters recognised by today’s digital natives.

For example, at the Nuremberg International Toy Fair 2016, new toy company Yey Toys presented a collection of toy characters based on popular internet memes such as the Trollface. This presents a

case of *toyification of internet-based phenomena*, in which player-generated ideas have been developed into a commercial product. Moreover, the company, in their marketing materials, invites players to “share photos of your internet friends now living in the real world” (Yey Toys catalogue 2016). In this way, the use of a physical plaything is suggested to be enhanced through appropriation of screen-based media, in this case a smartphone including a camera function.



Image 1. Internet Meme Toys by [Yey toys](http://Yeytoys.com).

Re-play: Summary

In this review, I have first presented a visualisation of the *ecosystem of contemporary play*, which involves several actors, including the play industries, players, play products and technologies, play media and social media platforms. The hypothesis lined out entailed that technologically mediated playscapes have significantly expanded the socially networked audiences and communities of players interested in object play and ‘traditional’, three-dimensional playthings – toy and game players of today – and connected them with the producers of play content. Through material, digital and finally social play practices, the nature of contemporary play has increasingly involved

interaction with various screens, and presents a case of ludic behavior that simultaneously resides both in physical and mediated encounters between playthings and players. Playing with physical or so called phygital, or hybrid, objects appears not only to be popular because of tangible play media and player practices based on physical encounters with other players in encounters at conventions. As presented in this review, interaction with play media also is popular because of play activities partaken on social media platforms, which enable the cultivation and sharing of play(things) and digital interaction with other players, allowing hybrid social play to take place. In the age of the ludic turn play media and social media converge into social experiences, hybrid play experiences that – potentially – generate social hybrid play value. Sometimes these experiences are based on the physicality of a toy, its digital value or a hybridity occurring between these. One example is presented by the *Augmented player experiences* (APE).

Conclusions

In the age of the ludic turn it is not only the industries of play that together with the rapidly developing technologies offer ludic content to contemporary players. It is the players present on social media platforms who also come to shape the cultures and values of play. An essential element in the networked ecosystem of contemporary play are screen-based technologies and object play patterns that appropriate use of screens whether they are on cameras, smart phones, tablets or computers. Players, who are on first-hand motivated by the manipulation that three-dimensional playthings offer, are on the other hand also interested in enhancing their play experiences through the appropriation of screens. Lastly, it is through these devices that contemporary play is captured, framed, represented, shared, evaluated and circulated. It is in social screen practices and the technologically mediated playscapes that the play of today manifests as hybrid social play. Obviously, social play value is built upon the idea of social sharing and interaction. Most social media function similarly as games: they enable interactivity which reminds of a feedback system familiar from games. Social play value also seems to flourish in playscapes that allow open-ended, creative play. Consequently, when designing for social play value, the industries of play need to consider how future products may suggest seamless interconnectedness with both emerging technologies and play patterns carried out in connection with screen-based devices and media. In sum, play material (whatever its form) should be camera-ready from any angle and easily captured by players, who in the age of the ludic turn are often interested in multiplatform play.

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Notes

[1] Geraghty notes David Gauntlett’s concept of ‘making is connecting’, which refers to a “resurgence of interest in craft activities, clubs and fairs” (Gauntlett 2011 quoted in Geraghty 2014, 133). DIY and maker cultures offer new insights to the production of contemporary play materials as presented on e.g. etsy.com and Kickstarter.

[2] In February 24th 2016, Finnish national broadcaster Yle published an article on its website about projects related to hybrid board games, see [“Pelaisitko Monopolia puhelinta apuna käyttäen? Sovellukset ja lautapelit halutaan naittaa”](#) [Would you play Monopoly with the help of your phone? There is a wish to marry apps with boardgames].

[3] Also still referred by many as the *video games* industry, see e.g. <http://www.euromonitor.com/toys-and-games>.

[4] This analysis is based on a combination of literary review concerned with digital and playful creativity and play industry related materials; press releases, newsletters, catalogues etc. published in association with the toy fairs in Nuremberg and New York, organised in January and February 2016.

[5] As this term only relates to games, it is also possible to consider a parallel, or more inclusive term, namely *Augmented play(ful) experiences*, APE.

[6] The small-scale case study of content using relevant tag words employed in this review was conducted on February 22 2016. The numbers of photographs, videos and projects that came up when using the search words were documented as screenshots of each in question. For each social media platform, some examples of photographs, videos and projects were also documented as screenshots. These documentations are in the researcher’s possession.