

Iconography in the Playroom

Classism and toys

INFORMATIVE/INVESTIGATE ARTICLE

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As young boys and girls, we are taught to never envy others or to want what another person has. However, despite our parents' best efforts, we have all been possessed by jealousy at one point or another, especially during moments like show and tell.

Most of us may remember the school day showcase. Some may have brought a picture of a favourite pet, others a souvenir from a recent trip, but most commonly, people brought a toy for the occasion. For some, show and tell would've been a day that was looked upon with fondness, but for others it evoked feelings of dread. The latter feeling being caused by a fear of ridicule and exclusion.

Superficial questions on the playground plaguing our little minds like; 'what Bratz doll do you have?' 'Did you get that new Lego set?' 'Did you see the doll that she brought in, it's not even a real Barbie?' Though we never knew it, the toys we had denoted our social standing. Our ability to judge our classmates' tastes in toys reveals a deeper sociological issue of classism that relates to play and childhood development.



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To best understand the divide within the toy aisle, we need to pick out two toys that are in competition with each other. For the sake of this article, I will pit American Girl dolls against mainstream girls' dolls (i.e., Barbie and Bratz).

First introduced in 1986 by Pleasant Company, American Girl Dolls are known for their high-quality products, fulfilling enrichment and educational value. Each doll comes with an accompanying book that explores the doll's historical background and teaches children about different eras and cultures.

American Girl dolls are seen as aspirational toys, designed to encourage girls to think about history, culture, and the world around them. With a wide range of product lines, American Girl have something for everyone. That is, everyone that can afford to buy into the lifestyle as a basic historical doll is expected to set you back \$115 (roughly £100). For the average family who makes roughly

£32,300 a year, spending money on their merchandise or travelling to their limited specialist stores, is out of the question.

However, there exists more mainstream options like Barbie dolls. The Mattel icon 'Barbie' can be found in most warehouse-style stores with an onslaught of options with prices ranging from \$14 to \$25 (roughly £10-£20).

However, toys like these are often style over substance with little emphasis on educational enrichment, thus creating an imbalance in the type of play achieved by these two toy types. Is it fair that certain instruments in early childhood development are available to a select few whilst others are left with misguided and misrepresented icons?



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By making well-rounded early development toys inaccessible, young children can be subjected to long-term developmental issues such as decreased

social function and increased susceptibility to external influence. Such concepts have been researched and discussed at length by sociologists. For those who would like to explore the concept through a sociological lens, I suggest Joel Best's journal article 'Too Much Fun: Toys as Social Problems and the Interpretation of Culture.'

Intellectual toys are marketed to parents with significant disposable incomes (and mainstream toys are often marketed towards families who prioritize entertainment value over education). These toys are designed to be cheap and accessible, making them more appealing to families with limited resources.

However, they also perpetuate the idea that play is purely for entertainment, rather than an opportunity for learning and development. Ultimately, what we worship is what we become. By prioritizing expensive, aspirational toys like those sold by the American Girl Franchise we reinforce the idea that education and intellectual pursuits are important, and that play can be a valuable opportunity for learning and growth.

Conversely, by prioritizing cheaper, mass-produced toys, we reinforce the idea that play is purely for entertainment, and that education and intellect are less important. Through monetary restriction, ideas of meritocracy and reduced class mobility are implicitly taught to impressionable children. Thus, giving those who are disadvantaged a jaded worldview and those who have a head start.

The covert classism hides in the fact that those who have more disposable income can buy better role models for their children, whilst the average family is left

with purely aesthetic icons who impose little to no goals or imagination on the child that plays with them. Though it may seem far-fetched, this arguably contributes directly to reduced class mobility.

This then begs the question, what should we do or what can be done? In all honesty, it depends on personal preference on how you would like a child to be raised. Perhaps instead of limiting play to physical items we should foster spaces for children to use their imagination or we should create better accessible characters for kids to look up to.



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