

Introduction

When History Becomes Child's Play

Lisa Jacobson

From the moment children enter kindergarten—and sometimes sooner—they begin to absorb the stories and lessons that shape their understanding of the past. By the time they exit high school, many teenagers, no doubt, will have spent hours reading history textbooks and memorizing dates and facts in preparation for exams. The history lessons that survive the passage into adulthood, however, are not always the ones learned in the classroom. For better—and sometimes for worse—the history that sticks is often the history children acquire in their leisure and playtime. Many adults fondly recall the childhood family vacation that included visits to a museum, a heritage site, or a famous battleground. Still others might recall the historical knowledge they picked up as a child or teenager from media of strikingly commercial origin: the lyrics to a hip hop record, the soundtrack to a musical, the drama of a Hollywood film, or the adventures of animated characters on Saturday morning cartoons. Some children forge a lifelong connection to history through these playtime encounters.

Public historians have good reason to see children's playthings and children's popular culture as a particularly fruitful site of analysis. Not only have games and toys become conduits of historical knowledge, but many of the businesses that manufacture children's playthings have, whether by intention or accident, become public history practitioners of sorts themselves. As it turns out, the business of making and selling historically themed children's games and toys can also be highly profitable. By the late 1990s, little more than a decade after Pleasant Rowland founded the American Girl Company, the firm netted approximately \$300 million in annual revenues. In 1998, Mattel purchased the company for \$700 million. Manufacturers of other historically themed games and toys have accumulated impressive profits as well. Although their historical content admittedly accounts only for a portion of their appeal, LEGOs, the board game *Risk*, and the computer

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strategy games *Civilization* and *Railroad Tycoon* all claim membership in the pantheon of blockbuster games and toys.

Of course, not all forms of historically oriented children's play have emerged from profit-driven enterprises. In fact, some of the most impactful were creations of public television (*Liberty's Kids*) and some of the most memorable were provided gratis by ABC's sponsorship of *Schoolhouse Rock!* (I would be willing to wager that a good number of *The Public Historian's* middle-aged readers could, with minimal prompting, hum the tune to *Schoolhouse Rock's* "Sufferin' for Suffrage.") During the American Bicentennial, nonprofit youth organizations such as the Camp Fire Girls and Girl Scouts oversaw numerous local history endeavors—including some that enabled girls to helm their own public history projects. As Jennifer Helgren's article in this issue shows, these edifying Bicentennial commemorations provided an effective counterpoint to the excessive commercialism that threatened to overtake the year-long celebration. They were the perfect antidote, one critic observed, to the proliferation of "buy-centennial burgers and red, white, and blue ice cream bars" (111).

Whether they generate handsome profits or none at all, children's playthings and children's popular culture have long been the focal point of parental anxieties and aspirations. Since the late nineteenth century, child experts in the US and Europe have viewed children's play as no idle matter. It was through play, they argued, that children acquired the skills, knowledge, and even discipline that would mold them into productive citizens. As the Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori famously declared, "Play is the work of the child." By the same token, such understandings of play also elevated concerns that children's play could expose them to corrupting influences. Children's attraction to movies, penny arcades, and other mass commercial amusements sparked fears that too much passive spectatorship was spoiling children's innocence and numbing critical thought. Yet rather than eschewing the commercial world, child experts embraced it, advising middle-class parents that play with the right kinds of toys in the right kinds of settings would guard against debasing cultural influences.¹ Similarly, a host of youth organizations—the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls—joined the sponsors of children's summer camps in promoting adult-supervised leisure and skills-based play (including the pursuit of merit badges) as a wholesome antidote to excessive commercialism and passive spectatorship.²

Much of this early-twentieth-century advice has remained a mainstay of parenting magazines and childrearing guidebooks. Eager to align themselves with such expert advice, makers of children's toys and games have long touted the edifying, skills-enhancing value of their goods. Middle-class parents have been particularly receptive to such appeals because they have often found it easier to give into

¹ Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Childrearing and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

² Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

children's consumer demands when the purchase in question served children's needs for wholesome edification and peer belonging. Over the course of the twentieth century, as mass marketers increasingly courted children as consumers in their own right, many parents and experts tasked children's playthings with a dual mission: to help raise productive citizens while also training children to be savvy consumers, capable of choosing quality goods over fleeting pleasures.³

Since the last third of the twentieth century, the makers of children's games, toys, and media have created what we might think of as a new category of redemptive, wholesome play: play that cultivates that child's historical imagination. This special issue examines the promises and limitations of using children's play to develop historical thinking and promote engagement with the past. The contributors evaluate the historical content of children's playthings and their utility in teaching children key historical concepts and modes of analysis. They also assess how effectively children's playthings and media have wrestled with difficult historical subjects such as racism, slavery, and imperialism. Are LEGOs and American Girl dolls—the very playthings that parents and experts have embraced as so-called “good toys”—as edifying or as benign as some have imagined? What sorts of lessons do they privilege and what sorts of issues get whitewashed or sidelined in the interest of protecting children's innocence and gaining parental acceptance?

The special issue also explores the pedagogical consequences of linking the acquisition of historical knowledge to the pursuit of consumer pleasures. Do children—and the adults they later become—remember (and forget) history learned from imaginative play differently from the history they learn from textbooks and schoolteachers? Put another way, is the process and impact of learning about the past different when the technologies for delivering instruction (games, toys, and mass media) unite the pleasures of consuming with the pleasures of intellectual discovery? Do the toys and games that spark the child's imagination prime the child to absorb the deeper and richer lessons of history that classrooms and museums supply? Or have mass marketers merely succeeded in using the lure of edification to make parents feel less guilty about succumbing to children's consumer demands for more American Girl dolls and the newest edition of *Civilization*? Alternatively, might such playthings deliver even more meaningful historical instruction than children acquire in traditional educational settings? Although such questions resist easy and definitive answers, this volume raises them to underscore why kids' stuff matters and why it deserves public historians' critical attention.

In the business of selling children's goods, success often hinges as much on marketers' ability to address parental anxieties and aspirations as it does on their ability to cultivate children's consumer desires. Emilie Zaslow's analysis of

³ Jacobson, *Raising Consumers*; Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Allison Pugh, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

American Girl's shifting marketing strategies over the past thirty years bears out this point. The company's founder Pleasant Rowland famously promoted her line of American Girl dolls and books as the playtime equivalent of eating "chocolate cake with vitamins"—a pleasurable yet edifying experience. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Zaslow argues, the brand's marketing tapped into parental anxieties about raising girls amid an increasingly sexualized popular culture. Appealing to nostalgia for a seemingly less threatening past, the brand's books and dolls promised to keep modern girls safely ensconced within a sanitized fictional past where girls enjoyed carefree childhoods unencumbered by premature exposure to adult knowledge. The brand's marketing, however, balanced its nod to neotraditionalism with an equally vigorous nod to feminism, assuring parents that the books would cast their sympathies with progressive social change and feature girls who pushed back against the constraining gender norms of the past. In the 1990s American Girl introduced African American, Mexican American, and Native American dolls to quell criticisms of their inattentiveness to diversity and failure to address the history of racial inequality.

The American Girl brand's move toward greater inclusivity threw into sharper relief some of the challenges of commercializing representations of the past, especially when that past dealt with the traumas of slavery and racism. It is not clear that brand developers fully thought through the moral quandaries of inviting girls to accessorize their new dolls of color and dress like them. The catalog copy promoting accessories for Addy, the enslaved African American character, was positively cringeworthy: "You'll be 'in the pink' when you step out in this classic cotton shirtwaist that matches Addy's." In other instances, Zaslow argues, commercial considerations compromised the intellectual content of the American Girl books. Mindful of the conservative backlash that accompanied multiculturalism's ascendancy, the company soft-pedaled the darker sides of US history, privileging, for example, narratives that celebrated Native American culture without forthrightly addressing the consequences of racial violence and settler colonialism. The American Girl brand gave commercial considerations (rather than scholarly ones) even greater weight after Mattel acquired the company. Increasingly, marketers promoted American Girl more as a tool for empowering girls than a source of intellectual enrichment, and the accompanying accessories, Zaslow writes, did more to encourage "normative feminine play with hair, food, and room decorating" than to promote engagement with the past (36).

Other contributors suggest that the historical scripts embedded in the marketing and design of beloved children's toys makes them less benign than we might initially assume. Colin Fanning's analysis of LEGOs, the quintessential educational toy, shows how toys prized for stimulating children's creativity can also shape how children imagine the past, even if the production of historical knowledge is not the toy's primary mission. Although children do not invariably follow LEGO's scripts for construction play (as suggested by the packaging and building instructions), the plastic building bricks, like all toys, nonetheless communicate to children

something about the cultural norms and beliefs of the societies they live in. Simply put, the toy maker establishes the cultural parameters in which children make their own meaning. LEGO's themed sets revolving around pirates, the "wild" American West, and tropical island-based archeological adventures—first introduced in the 1980s and 1990s—highlight how historical narratives that valorize whiteness and European heritage creep into toys marketed as innocent construction play. Although LEGO claimed that the uniformly yellow minifigures that came with these themed sets were unraced, a variety of other cues (tribal tattoos, grass skirts, face paint, headdresses, tropical foliage) marked the Islander and Native American minifigures as nonnormative. As Fanning argues, the themed play sets repackaged "European imperial and American settler colonial histories as unproblematic material for children's play (rather than troubled legacies of expansion, exploitation, and displacement)" (47). Such sensibilities also surfaced in some of the large-scale themed Miniland installations at the LEGOLAND theme parks in Billund, Denmark, and Carlsbad, California.

While the imperial mindset operates as subtext in LEGO's themed sets, narratives of imperial conquest lie at the very heart of Sid Meier's *Civilization*, a turn-based computer strategy game in which players compete to "build an empire to stand the test of time." John Majewski's article examines the game's appeal to teenage boys (and the men they become) as well as the game's potential to teach history. Drawing upon social media posts by the game's fans on Reddit and YouTube, Majewski finds that the game's promise of achieving mastery through competition and its "safely contained violence" made *Civilization* particularly appealing to teenage boys (70). While the pleasures of perfecting winning strategies and tactics to achieve world domination keep most players coming back for more, a small group of fans also hail the edifying historical dimensions of the game. The game's historically minded fans credit the game for sparking a lifelong interest in history, introducing them to different world cultures, and teaching them about the role of contingency and causality in historical change. Some players even use the game to test historical counterfactuals, trying to discern how shifting a few key variables, such as upgrading the technological prowess of their civilization or rearranging its environmental assets, might in turn change historical outcomes. For a variety of reasons, however, Majewski (and many of the game's fans) view *Civilization* as a problematic tool for teaching historical thinking. Not only does the game valorize conquest and Western notions of cultural superiority and material progress, but it also locates historical agency almost entirely in elites rather than ordinary people. As the imagined leader of a civilization, the player pulls all the levers, leaving little room for consideration of how social movements might impact historical change. The game's incessant focus on competition also discourages the development of empathy and cultural understanding and strips history of its power to offer moral lessons. Finally, because players can create a wide array of simulations—some entirely unrealistic to given moments of time—the game blurs the line between historical counterfactuals and outright fantasy.

The makers of children's games and toys are not the only enterprises that have used play to engage children's historical imagination. Two contributors in this volume highlight the American Bicentennial as a moment when media corporations and nonprofit youth organizations sponsored public service-oriented history projects that aimed to cultivate children's civic mindedness as well as their interest in history. Paul Ringel analyzes the animated *Schoolhouse Rock!* shorts that ABC sandwiched between Saturday morning cartoons in the mid-1970s and uses them as a springboard for contemplating how such programming could be revived and reimagined for child audiences in the twenty-first-century US. The animated shorts originated as a response to criticisms from consumer watchdog groups that children's television was plagued by too many commercials and lacking in educational value. In lieu of suspending its advertising and replacing cartoons with more edifying fare, ABC appeased critics by sponsoring short interstitial programming that taught children grammar and math as well as civics and history. Drenched in psychedelic colors and set to lively tunes, *Schoolhouse Rock!*'s history shorts presented consensus-based interpretations of the American Revolution, the women's rights movement, immigration, and westward expansion. Although *Schoolhouse Rock!*'s aesthetics were au courant, its scholarly interpretations were outdated even for the times. Created to coincide with the upcoming Bicentennial celebrations, *Schoolhouse Rock!*, Ringel argues, "presented the nation's history as an established, even consecrated narrative rather than an ongoing project of investigation and vigorous debate"—a vision strikingly out of step with the social and political turbulence of the era (84). ABC's cautious approach was particularly evident in its avoidance of subjects that might have disrupted *Schoolhouse Rock!*'s celebratory vibe—Native Americans, slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and struggles for civil rights—and in its tendency to minimize the intense social conflicts that surrounded the American Revolution and the fight for women's suffrage.

While *Schoolhouse Rock!* packaged traditional historical narratives in kid-friendly psychedelic wrapping, the Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls incorporated some of the revisionist currents of contemporary women's history and social history in their Bicentennial projects. As Jennifer Helgren's essay shows, these organizations welcomed the Bicentennial as an opportunity for girls to contribute to the national celebration while also working to expand the historical record to include evidence of women's contributions to the nation's development. Some of the history projects girls undertook fit comfortably within the traditional feminine domain. Girls assembled Bicentennial cookbooks, sewed heritage quilts, helped to restore historic sites, and beautified their communities—the sorts of adult-supervised local history endeavors that had long fallen under women's purview. Other Bicentennial activities, however, allowed girls to helm their own woman-centered public history projects. Girls mined local history resources and interviewed community leaders in their quest to uncover "hidden heroines" in their midst. They read biographies of both notable and ordinary women and created public history exhibitions to commemorate their historical significance. These sorts of "contribution history"

projects impressed upon girls the value of creating a more inclusive and multicultural past. Although girls' own versions of "history from the bottom up" ventured beyond the consensus interpretations presented in *Schoolhouse Rock!*'s, they also shared some of *Schoolhouse Rock!*'s blindspots. As Helgren demonstrates, girls' history projects rarely challenged celebratory settler colonial narratives or wrestled with the ways overlapping class and racial oppressions could produce vastly different experiences for different groups of women.

Several of the Reports from the Field highlight how American Girl and other girl-centered history projects have endeavored to overcome these cultural blindspots by incorporating racially diverse perspectives and refusing to shy away from difficult and potentially controversial historical subjects. Mark Speltz provides an insider's perspective on the process of creating Melody Ellison, the third African American character in the American Girl book and doll line. Released in 2016, Melody, a native of Detroit, introduced children to a different side of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Recognizing that children's literature has rarely examined the movement outside the deep South, Melody's creators (a team of historians, movement activists, and brand developers) chose to situate the struggle against racial injustice in Detroit, a locale that they believed would produce a more complex story, stocked with situations that resonate with our current moment (racial profiling by police, housing and job discrimination, underfunded public schools, senseless violence). In *No Ordinary Sound*, the book that introduces Melody, readers see Melody boycott and picket discriminatory businesses, write letters to city officials, and press for representation of African Americans in school textbooks. Melody's varied protests against racial injustice, Speltz argues, broaden children's understanding of the movement while also inviting them to recognize their own power to change things for the better.

Although Speltz does not specifically address this issue, some public historians might wonder whether Melody's commercial packaging fully aligns with such aims. The accessories that accompany Melody—a loose facsimile of a Motown Record studio and a neighborhood block party set—are notably removed from the settings where Melody protested discrimination. Although Motown and neighborhood block parties both helped to forge community solidarity in the 1960s, do such accessories foster the kind of play that encourages children to imagine themselves as warriors for justice or politically engaged citizens? They certainly might—Motown's hit song "Dancing in the Streets," after all, became an activist anthem for various protest movements. It is also possible, however, that such accessories could redirect the child's imagination down a more distinctly consumerist and apolitical path. Are commercial representations of the past any more vulnerable to misappropriation than noncommercial representations of the past? Perhaps so, perhaps not. But it is certainly worth considering, as Emilie Zaslow's essay does, the myriad ways in which the commercial packaging of historically themed toys can simultaneously buttress and undercut the carefully honed messages advisory panels hope child readers will absorb.

Children's book authors have also confronted the challenge of addressing racism, classism, poverty, and anti-Black violence and the uncomfortable negative emotions that such inequalities produce. As Molly Rosner's review of Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer* discusses, children's book authors, including some who have published in the American Girl book series, have tended to feature Black characters and Black families that share the "respectable" values and behaviors of white, middle-class readers. The award-winning *One Crazy Summer*, published in 2010, departs from this more traditional approach with its nuanced takes on both Black girlhoods and the Black Panthers, an activist group often demonized by the media. The book centers on eleven-year-old Delphine, who attends a day camp run by the Black Panthers while she and her sisters spend the summer of 1968 with their estranged mother in Oakland, California. Delphine's untraditional mother (a Black Panther artist who lacks maternal qualities) and Delphine's refusal to play nicely when faced with injustices make her an atypical girl protagonist. Whereas most American Girl characters moderate their emotions and express anger politely, Delphine is openly confrontational. In broadening notions of what constitutes permissible behavior in girls, Rosner argues, Williams-Garcia also helps readers empathize with the righteous anger that informed the Black Panthers' radical politics.

The new Smithsonian exhibition *Girlhood (It's Complicated)*, scheduled to run from October 2020 to January 2023 before going on the road, also disrupts popular understandings of girls and girlhood. In their Report from the Field, Kathleen Franz and other curators of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History discuss the creation of the exhibition, which examines the history of girlhood in the US over the past two hundred years. Created to help commemorate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment prohibiting sex-based voting restrictions, the exhibition puts girls on the frontlines of cultural, political, and social change in the US, challenging visitors to see girls not only as women in the making but as changemakers themselves. In positioning girls as political actors, the exhibition broadens the realm of the political to include girls' battles for social justice as well as their struggles both to fulfill and defy society's expectations. The exhibition's focus on the politics of girlhood also influenced its design. To reflect the varied voices and experiences of girls from different races, classes, and ethnicities, the exhibition's writers and designers incorporated the stylistic sensibilities of zines, a cultural form that adolescent girls have used since the late 1980s to define themselves and articulate their discontents. The choice to foreground the public lives of girls on the occasion of the Nineteenth Amendment's centennial illustrates just how much the field of gender history has changed since the days when Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls unearthed "hidden heroines" to commemorate the Bicentennial of the nation's founding. *Girlhood (It's Complicated)* invites visitors to see girls, too, as drivers of history and girlhood itself as both a contested cultural construct and a lived experience that often varied sharply by race and class.

The meanings children ascribe to their childhoods and their playthings often elude adults and historians. As the essays by Fanning and Majewski reveal, children do not invariably engage with (or even recognize) the historical knowledge embedded in their games and toys. Nor do children invariably play with toys in ways that conform to the manufacturers' intentions or fulfill their parents' aspirations. In fact, children sometimes repurpose games and toys to create their own forms of public history and their own usable pasts. Majewski's essay, for example, features *Civilization* players who create alternative scenarios that transform history's expected victors into the vanquished. Calling his scenario the "Creeconquista of North America," one such player created a simulation in which the Cree conquered weakened colonial governments.

The pleasures of play, including the pleasures of inventing an imagined past, have helped some children and adolescents forge attachments to history that endure long into adulthood. A notable number of American Girl doll owners and even a few *Civilization* players have turned their childhood and adolescent interests into history careers. The Report from the Field by Allison Horrocks and Mary Mahoney illustrates how adults develop new understandings of the past when they revisit the childhood playthings that sparked their interest in history. As hosts of the *American Girl* podcast, Horrocks and Mahoney, who both hold PhDs in history, provide a forum for themselves and their listeners to critically evaluate the historical and contemporary meanings of American Girl. Each episode of the biweekly podcast, which debuted in February 2019, revisits the books and accessories that brought an American Girl character to life. The hosts entertain questions from listeners, who also share their own insights and experiences. Much as some adult *Civilization* players engage in what Majewski calls an "immersive critique" of the game—picking apart the flawed historical narratives that inform the game's assumptions—the hosts and listeners of the American Girl Podcast delight in reexamining the books and characters they enjoyed as children. The hosts analyze how the context in which the books and accessories were created influenced their depictions of the past and sometimes imagine how a revised narrative could incorporate more racially diverse perspectives into the character's original story. In the process of reexamining the past, the hosts and listeners discover that neither the past nor their relationship to it is fixed in place. The podcast also explores how American Girl characters acquire additional afterlives in the realms of fan fiction and Instagram. Whether by writing new queer backstories, extending the existing storylines for dolls of color, or outfitting the characters in hijabs, American Girl's fans and critics have found ways to create richer and more nuanced historical pasts that speak to their diverse needs and experiences.

The contributors to the volume highlight the many pitfalls of using children's playthings to develop historical thinking and promote engagement with the past. They reveal how some of the most beloved games, toys, and animated cartoons have transported nostalgic and outdated renderings of the past into the realm of children's play. The contributors also invite us to imagine new ways to harness the

pleasures of play to edifying ends. Some propose alternative approaches that cultivate children's empathy and forthrightly address the concept of systemic inequality (Ringel, Majewski), while the Reports from the Field model new ways to present difficult subjects, foreground diverse perspectives, and highlight the historical agency of children themselves. Their findings also raise questions about how the gendering of children's play might encourage girls and boys to view the past through different lenses. Does the empathic play fostered by the American Girl dolls yield different types of historical understanding than the competitive, mastery-driven play of computer strategy games? That is just one avenue of future inquiry the volume might inspire. When it comes to teaching and learning history, children's play is serious business indeed.

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