

STORIES IN 8 TO 12 YEAR OLD CHILDREN'S PRETEND PLAY

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Introduction

“I still like to play a little, I still think it’s fun, although I’m already 11 years old. I really can’t say this to anyone in my class, because everybody’s trying to act so ‘cool’.” M005at2

Are games and plays disappearing? In many studies there have been expressions of concern, or one is left with an impression that different kinds of games played by children would be getting more and more impoverished in their contents or are even disappearing altogether. In the material I have collected among school children 7–12 years of age in Helsinki and Tallinn for my doctorate thesis on imaginative and role games played by school children, my findings have been contradictory to this proposition. The material collected during the year 2000 (and 2001), containing over 1500 descriptions of games and plays shows that the games played by children are by no means poor in their contents nor are they in the course of disappearing altogether; instead, those games exist in children’s reality, in their world, hidden from the adults.

My research material consists of theme writings and theme interviews of 7–12-year-olds in Helsinki and Tallinn. I have obtained the written material, the descriptions written by the children themselves, through theme writing (The theme interviews were carried out by students of folklorism during their field study course in the spring 2001. The material will be kept in the Folklore Archives at Finnish Literature Society.)

The children had no problems to come up with a game they liked to describe. My impression was that they actually enjoyed the assignment, although in some classes the first reaction was: “We’re not playing any games any more!” I then had to appeal to them explaining how important it really was for me to learn of their games and that no one else at their school would read their answers but I, at which point they, with only a few exceptions, agreed to start writing. I also received some comments as the older children handed out their assignments such as “Where can I put this paper? I

feel so ashamed of it” or “you mustn’t show this to the other students in my class, I would die out of shame”.

In my research a game is often detached from its circumstances, from the environment in which children play it. This means I have to study games as they are told and described by children. I believe it’s impossible for a child to describe a game in all its versatility and different dimensions. When writing about a game, children draw an outline of the game; they concentrate on the events, actors and the surroundings of the game. In other words, they describe the elements they find essential in a particular game, thus outlining the plot of the game. Elements like feelings and dialogues, which essentially belong to the game, are often not described at all.

I would have liked to observe more of those games featured in my research material, but as I asked the children a permission for it, I would almost constantly receive a negative answer. Most of the children do not under any circumstances want someone to observe or videotape their games (not at least those they wrote about) because *“then we couldn’t play if some outsider was there on the spot”* or *“it wouldn’t work because we’d be acting the game and not playing it”*.

The themes of the games and plays in my research material range from space adventures to building play cabins, from animal plays to defusing a bomb, from cops and robbers to an archeological museum, and besides these there is a whole variety of different kinds of ball games and chasing games.

Children’s play and game descriptions reveal that games have their lifespans. In the following, I’ll observe a game from the point of view of its lifespan. As a term “the lifespan of a game” is a colloquial metaphor but I think it describes very well both the game as a whole and the activity of the game. The games are born, they develop and they live their lives until they come to an end.

Games can be divided into short- and long term ones, according to their lifespan. Games with a clear beginning, an intensive middle part and an ending, have a clear lifespan. This kind of games with a clear lifespan are usually short term games, where the lifespan is included in the idea of the game (games like tag or cops and robbers). The long term games in turn last for days, even for several months or years, and they are made up by children themselves. They are easy to interrupt and to resume again. In long term games, the beginning and the ending of the game are often difficult to define. They are blurred with the action of the game getting all the attention.

(Now I will concentrate on the long term games and their stories.)

What makes children play one day after the other, even a year after the other?

Most of my material is connected with the middle part of the lifespan of a game. It is the part of the game, where the children seem to enjoy the game the most. In my material, none of the descriptions of long term games clearly describe the lifespan of a play as a whole.

Sometimes the game lasts for years, sometimes only for a moment, but nearly all games include a period of high playing intensity.

A trailer as a home (a 11 years old girl from Pohjois-Haaga primary school in Helsinki)

I don't remember exactly what it was that I played last, but about a year ago my little sister and I played a game where I was the mother or the older sister, my sister was the sister and a Babyborn doll "Jenna" was the baby. We played that the bed was a trailer and we loaded it with all kind of stuff. We were running away from the "baby snatchers", and we imitated their sounds. Once they came to visit us and we hid Jenna under a blanket, and soon they were gone. We would always go out to look for our things in the night-time. We used to play this game a few times before this. Usually, we would find Jenna in the woods when my sister was looking there for our things. She would hear the baby cry and bring it to the "trailer", and that's how it got started. Sometimes the baby would be the little sister of both of us, and our mother would be dead, or I would be my sister's big sister and have a baby.

It is not unusual that the game is being played for months as the description of a 10-year-old Helsinki girl will soon show us. "The Nasty Professor" is a game that has been going on for a long time. The girls have many versions of this game, which shows among other things that the game is under constant change, it lives as it is being played. Some of its events remain through different versions and are repeated over and over. The game is supported by the repeating events in the plot as well as the figures in its core. These form the basic material for the game, keeping this particular game alive. Some of the events happen only once but they play an important role maintaining the intensity of the game. The game assumes new forms, the stories however winding around the figure of the "Nasty Professor".

"I was about seven years old, and the favourite game that I liked to play with my friend was the "Nasty Professor". We played it nearly every time we were outside together. There were many versions to it; here I'll list the most common ones. 1. We were on a climbing apparatus, and the Professor (he was invisible) tried to catch us, but he couldn't get onto the apparatus. At times we went down to the ground to get some leaves, sand and other "food". It was while the Professor was sleeping. We made some chow and we "ate" them, and this was repeated over and over again. 2. (This one we played in the winter). We took turns being the Professor and his victim. The one who played the Professor made his victim drink different drinks and poisons and eat all kind of things. When the victim managed to run away, we changed roles and the same thing started from the beginning. Sometimes we made some changes; the Professor for instance took as for prisoners and took us to a little cottage. S004bt13 (Girl, 10 years)

Each child carries within him thousands of stories and fairy tales (see Riihelä, 2000; Karlsson, 2000). Many of children's written descriptions give the impression that the game is formed like stories while it's being played. Both the fairy tale like games and the games that could actually be reality, are true to a child in the world of games. What makes the game a long term game, interesting enough to inspire the children one month after the other, is the story of the game, the frame it is based on. The game goes on and the story develops at least as long as the children are fascinated by the story.

The fact that children may define a game according to its age, also tells something about the duration of games. In other words, some game may be brand new "we just made it up, it hasn't really started yet" or it can be so old that its lifespan is coming to an end "well I don't want to tell you about it because we have been playing it for weeks."

The next one is an example of an old game.

A Home Game

We often used to play home outside. It went something like this. I was often one of the sisters, and my other friends would be the father, the mother and so on. The youngest one would always want to be the baby or the little child. The baby's bed was always on a table, and besides it there was a table and benches on each side of it; that was the kitchen. We always marked the walls, and some of these walls were actual walls. The living-room was under the real roof. We would often go downtown. We always took out a real pram. The baby would always be restless and start to cry. Then everybody would try to calm down the baby hushing at it, and we would pick her in our arms (if we still managed to lift her). In the kitchen we "ate" sand and "drank" some cocoa (by mixing sand into water), we used leaves torn from the nearby bushes and grass from the ground as a salad, sometimes we had tree bark as bread. The mother cooked the meal and the sister would help her. We always had "beautiful" cakes. We didn't use much the living-room, only the "children" would play there. When the "night" came and we went to sleep, we would "sleep" on the table, on the benches, in the baby's bed and so on. The morning came after about 5 seconds because we didn't do anything during the night. But that play is very old. The end." I006ctl

Why are some games fascinating enough to give inspiration to other forms of activity?

Why do you want to turn a game into a comic strip or a theatre play? I believe the basic reason is the story of the play. It is something in the story, in the figures, in the events, or in the plot that makes you want to stick to it. In the following description, the children have started to make a comic strip based on their game.

Maria and Bozo

"This may sound odd. Maria and Boso are wolves, actually Playmobil wolves. Maria is the queen of the Wolf valley. And mark this: Bozo is NOT the king! Maria and Bozo have three children: two girls and a boy. They are Vanda, Tanya and the Fool. Maria has by the way a hot temperament; she's quite a shrew. If she gets angry, she hits with her broom! And then about the children; Vanda reminds most of her mother. She uses the broom just like her. Tanya only sweeps with it. And the Fool doesn't even know how to use the broom! Well then, they live in Villa de Wolves, which is a beautiful mansion on the highest hilltop of the Wolf valley. Their worst enemies are rabbits because they steal everything from the wolves. The wolves try to eat them, but they won't be able to catch them anyway. I used to play this game with one of my friends, but now we're making a cartoon of it. One thing about the rabbits: they form a group that is led by Milla the Rabbit and Brother the Rabbit. Remember, this game is a BIG secret!!!" P004bt4

Examples of the stories in Home Games (2 video clips)

According to studies (see Strandell 1995) the basic elements in games of kindergarten children is a mother and a child, but this core family grows further to involve sisters, brothers, animals, grandparents and sometimes even a father according to the likings of the players. Traditionally (Kalliala 1999), home games have been viewed as games where children and dolls are family members and where they experience every day life situations together. As soon as children figure out that girls grow up to be mothers and boys to be fathers, it is seldom that a wrong future role is selected when playing home.

The next example

(Barbie families seem quite popular among games including several families.)

“Until last year my cousin and I would still play with Barbie dolls (11½ years old at the moment). Although we live afar from each other, we would meet at least twice a month. Every time we would play with the Barbies. If we had got new Barbie dolls, we would take them into the game. We built houses and cars for them. We invented names for them and started to play. Each of us had her own Barbie family with a mother, 1–2 sisters, 1–2 little sisters and pets. The families were rich. The fathers were always working abroad (on a job assignment). Sometimes a hurricane or a flood, or even an earthquake would hit the families. Usually, the Barbies lived in California or New York. They had their own kitchens and all kinds of little stuff. We used our imaginations to find all kinds of things to do for the Barbies. For example, the bed would turn into a swimming-pool and a bicycle helmet into a space car. We improvised the things the dolls would be saying to each other, and sometimes the game turned into a conversation of all the things we would want ourselves. Sometimes it took hours to decorate the Barbie house in a very imaginative way.”

The interviews show that one of the models for this particular Barbie game was the television series “The Bold and the Beautiful”. But as can be seen from this short game description, the game was by no means full of dramatic relationships but rather, in addition to the every day life situations, adventures quite different from the television series, some natural disasters, sudden changes in the plot and feelings of happiness for just being there together. The mothers and the children with their pets form the basis of the family while the fathers are often on a job assignment working somewhere else. A lot of time was dedicated to decorating the houses. (Sometimes the girls were taken into dreaming of their own futures, and “the game turned into a conversation of all the things we would want ourselves”.)

Barbie-dolls are a very popular way to play home among schoolgirls in Helsinki. In these Barbie home games the game and all the things involved in the game are arranged in a very precise way. Children clearly enjoy themselves in building the homes and decorating them, coming up with names for the dolls and so on.

In the following video excerpt there are girls 9 years of age playing with Barbie dolls, and in this game there is only one family. A guest is coming to visit the Barbie family: president Tarja Halonen. The president wants to try out obstacle riding on the family’s new horse. There are lots of things to do before the president’s visit; the protocol is carefully studied through before her arrival, and the Barbie children receive feedback on their behaviour after the visit. The best chair in the house – which in this game happens to be a potty of the Baby Born doll – is reserved for the president.

(This video is an excerpt from this game, and it starts as the family are looking for the best shoes and are doing their the last-minute preparations for the presidential arrival. The family goes to bed, as the president will come for the visit in the morning. The mother cries out loud: “Wake up, everyone!”, and so the morning has come. One of the children swears saying: “Damn it”, and the mother is shocked at this telling him that it was the worst she had heard for a long time. The first doorbell sound is a false alarm, as there is a delivery boy bringing the riding helmet the family had ordered. But then comes the time for president Tarja Halonen to arrive. The president is politely asked if she cared to watch the TV first or have some cereals. The president picks up a silver plate and a napkin and places some raisins and apples on the plate. (The angry voice belongs to the mother, Laura, the girl with a shorter hair plays among others with the doll presenting the mother, and the other girl with her hair in plaits plays the dolls presenting the children and the president.)

When playing home, school-aged children are sometimes particular about choosing their roles. In the following game 11 years old boys in Helsinki have extended a home game to include the whole city, but according to their own words they are just play “*home, you know, the normal kind of life*”. This game is by no means exceptional, which is to say that several other friends of their age play this kind of games. Here is a fragment from the interview.

“There’s a building site in Pikku-Huopalahti, actually it’s behind a petrol station, and there we used to play ‘home’. We used carts we had found at the parking lot and played driving them as if they were cars, looking for our so-called ‘homes’ that were cardboard boxes. We were usually four boys, and we had our homes and professions. We didn’t think it as childish, although we were 11 of age. I am the mayor, and the mayor is elected in a general election. Then there are a fire chief and a chief police officer. If you screw up in the traffic, you get fined for it. We have imaginative wives and all that stuff. We go to visits with them and have adventures with them. Actually, we’re just playing ‘the normal life’.”

In this game a family is no longer a separate island but a organic part of the whole society and its power structures: *If you screw up in the traffic, you get fined for it*. The interviewee also tells that *they have wives and professions* and continues stating that *they have wives...they go to visits...and have adventures*. Regardless the fact that the children’s game family is already a part of the game society, this is not about learning the adults’ life, practising for “the real life”, or imitating the adults; instead, children have created their own society because they think it is fun. The boys themselves are not mothers in the game although they do have their families in the game Boys play men with wives. They do not mention anything of the children. In this game the activities do not take place at home; instead the family is more outwards-oriented. It appears that activities outside the home in a profession or in the field of traffic is more important, although home and its existence are emphasised.

The boys did not let me videotape their game last year, but they allowed me to videotape them as they were recalling their memories of the game because “*it wouldn’t be so embarrassing*”. This game seemed to be so much of fun and of interest that I definitely wanted to give faces to the players.

(In the video the boys recall what professions and what kind of homes they had. One of the boys was a pizza taxi driver, and the pizzas were round pieces of cardboard, and some nuts and bolts served as coins. They also built a bus where they took passengers in. The video ends with the scene of the boys thinking of all the troubles they had, and telling that sometimes the game went on late that their fathers had to pick them up; another cause of trouble were the workman at the building site who could drive them away in the middle of the game but luckily not during the weekend.) (The video: Normal Life)

The parents and the children's games

For adults it is hard to appreciate children’s games and actions as such without associating them to something they are supposed to lead to such as the next development phase. Games are regarded as a means of practice for the real life, a form of practice whose true benefits will realise later. What really happens in the sphere of a game, is more rarely considered meaningful as such. My own research material shows good evidence of this by establishing that parents rarely know any details of their children’s doings, let alone their games. On the other hand, children think parents ought not to

know of these games. The children who have taken part in my study have not voluntarily told their parents of the games they play. For example, once I asked some boys, what their parents thought of those games in which they played "the real life", and they replied to me: *"Are you crazy? They don't know anything, they think we're riding bicycles."*

According to my research material children are of the opinion that parents are not interested in their own children's doings, let alone their games. They frequently doubted how genuine my personal interest in their games could be. A comment that is best imprinted in my mind was offered by a 11 years old boy from Itäkeskus elementary school saying: *"You can't really be interested in games, now can you. Oh, now I get it, they pay you money for it!"*

The surroundings create many kinds of pressure towards the children's behaviour, and this includes pressures towards the games they play. For instance, a child, who has attained the age in which the community no longer considers it appropriate to play games, may be disapproved. It is usually easiest to give in to the pressure from the outside even if one still felt inclined to do the opposite. (Korkiakangas 1996, 211). The influence of the peers to giving up the visible forms of games has also been brought up (e.g. Virtanen 1981, 71–74; Lipponen 1990, 105–106). This influence is strongly attested in my own material also, where it is apparent that children tend to be secretive of their games. Children often conceal their games both from their parents and from their school friends and also from the friends they do not play with. It is very important to children that I do not show their descriptions of the games to their school friends or teachers. The only reason for this is hardly the feeling of shame that one should still play games, but I consider it at least as one factor.

For a child, a game can be something so personal that he or she does not want to share it with the adults. In his mind a game belongs to his world, not to that of the adults; the reality of a game exists only for him, and one part of protecting the game is not to mention it to parents. Although playing is an essential part of the child's world, we have to remember that grown-ups and children are not living in separate worlds, we also share the same world.

"Just don't tell or show this to anyone at our school. They'll laugh if they find out that I'm still making clothes for dolls although I'm 11. But I'll play as long as I want to." S005bt6

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