



And my mind is like a hand, it touches rather than thinks.

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thank you to

my stuffed animals, for always putting up with me
Paula, my sister, for all the years of playing together
my friends and family, for all the support
Éléa, for making everything feel less impossible

abstract

And my mind is like a hand, it touches rather than thinks is an interactive installation exploring the emotional experience of violent play with cute toys, which is a widespread phenomenon and a very intimate situation. Based on collected play anecdotes from other people's childhoods as well as my own, the work invites the player to embody a stranger's memory and negotiate their own emotions and boundaries within an escalating story. The interface of the play is a rug on which the player places play objects, which then get scanned by sensors that trigger a text-based narrative on a screen. The interaction is structured like a choose-your-own adventure game where the choices focus on how far the player wants to go in the story. The installation opens questions about why we are drawn to darkness in play, what we are negotiating in violent play staged with cute objects and what kind of emotional spaces this opens up.

table of contents

	abstract	vii
	introduction	3
	the installation	6
	connected concepts	15
	cuteness	16
	narratology	17
	safe space / magic circle	18
	desire / taboo	19
	projection / embodiment	20
	on the title	21
	notes on psychology	24
	violence in play culture	28
	conclusion	33
	bibliography	36



introduction

I had just spent hours setting everything up in my room: The dollhouse my grandpa built for me, my stuffed animals, my *Schleich* figurines, the *Playmobil* princess castle, small plastic fences and ribbons to separate different areas. I had been looking forward to this moment the whole time, everything was finally ready to go. What was about to happen felt exciting, more exciting than the unicorn princess wedding I had just staged with my best friend the day before.

On a regular day, the little horse and her mom were going to walk to school in the morning and suddenly a group of animals would surround them and violently separate them, taking the little horse into the big house where she would be held for ransom by the evil duo, the stork and the frog. She'd be locked in a room and if she didn't comply with what she was asked to do, she'd be tortured. Meanwhile the horse mom would be running around town panicked, trying to find a way to pay the ransom, and eventually going to the castle to beg the cruel princess for help. But once she'd gotten to the big house, the accomplices of the evil duo would try to take the money and then kill her by pushing her out the window, so they could keep the little horse as a slave. As the horse mom would be falling out the window, a giant duck would fly by, saving her from certain death and freeing her daughter who would follow her through the window. The duck belonged to a rivalling gang and was there to ruin the evil duo's plan and to recruit the horses to be part of its next mission. The evil duo would already start planning their next attack and the drama would be far from over. Also, the cruel princess would still have a score to settle with the horse mom...

What made this play session feel different from the one with my best friend was that when nobody was watching, there was this specific kind of desire guiding me, my heart was beating fast and my face felt warm when things were starting to get intense. When I was letting the little horse get tortured, I was intrigued by what exactly could happen to her, how far it might go. But there was a hesitation, maybe some shame, creating tension. The tension didn't feel bad though, it just made me more curious to keep taking things further. To make up for what the characters had been through, I'd always make sure they get to safety in the end, but what excited me is that the danger was still looming.

In order for me to enter this emotional state of tension and excitement, certain conditions needed to be in place. I had to be in a safe space, where I knew I wouldn't be disturbed, only then was I able to reach a flow state and not snap out of it involuntarily in the middle of a scene. I had to be sure that nobody could watch or hear me, so that I could perform for nobody else but myself. I had to be in a mental space where I was able to surrender myself to the experience and wasn't preoccupied with other things. That's when I could let the excitement drag me deeper and deeper into the violent intricacies of my story, often repeating especially scary moments if they didn't feel right the first time or if they felt so good to play out that I wanted to go again.

I have never liked any kind of media that depicts graphic violence, not in film, books, or games, because it made me deeply uncomfortable, it still does today. I think the difference here is that in my play, I was fully in control of what was happening and thus able to predict the violence and its severity. There was an underlying feeling of security and understanding of my boundaries that I was gently pushing as far as I wanted, maybe in order to better understand them.

None of the toys I was playing with suggested violence in any way, like, say, a toy gun would. They were cute and soft, they looked innocent and in advertisements they were staged inside of a perfect, happy world. So all of the violence was coming from me.

At the time, I wasn't questioning my play behaviour. I was following my desire and curiosity and listening to my emotional responses along the way. I would later go on to find out that this was maybe not a universal experience, but a very common one that most of my friends as well as strangers on the internet had experienced in their childhood.

Throughout my studies and as I'm expanding my artistic practice and research, I often come back to themes around exploration of identity through play, the relationship to oneself and the contrast between softness and harshness in play spaces.



the installation

Lea van Hall

And my mind is like a hand, it touches rather than thinks, 2026.

Interactive Installation

Nylon rug, lacquered MDF, lacquered stainless steel, cotton fabric, NFC modules, NFC chips, microcontroller, PC, screen, various play objects.

I made this installation based on this specific kind of violent play, because I was intrigued by all the juxtapositions that exist inside of this context. The contrast between cuteness and violence fascinates me, on a visual and conceptual level.

The installation is centred around a rug, slightly elevated on a platform, that is reminiscent of a play rug, like the ones with streets and houses printed on them, but more abstract. Placed on the rug are different play objects. By moving the objects to specific areas around the rug, as instructed by text seen on the screen, the viewer experiences different play scenarios that get increasingly violent. Throughout the interaction, the viewer, who in this case becomes a player, is asked to assess their emotional response and thus decide whether the story should keep going or not. If they feel too uncomfortable, the story will end, and if they feel intrigued, the violence will keep escalating. To ease the player into the interaction, the title already implies that touch plays a role in the work, there are cushions on the floor inviting them to sit down and get closer, and the screen instructs them to “place an object on ★ to start.”

I wanted to work with real people's own recollections of play scenarios from their childhood, which I collected and used as a basis to write each script. As I don't want to reproduce explicit violence and handle people's personal memories with care, the writing is kept intentionally vague, focusing more on the emotional space the play is happening in, which is essentially what this work is about. The player gets to embody a stranger's memory and re-negotiate the boundaries that were being tested by the original play. The embodiment happens through the physical interaction with the objects and through emotional response: By asking them to move their body to place the play objects, to touch the different textures used in the installation and to make conscious reflections on their emotional response to the story, the mechanics guide the player into experiencing the tension associated with these play anecdotes. By putting the player into a more passive role by limiting their agency, while still allowing them to set their own boundaries, the installation tries to evoke the feelings the original creators of these scenarios may have felt while playing them, and maybe also touch on the player's own similar memories. That way the focus is on the emotional experience and the draw of a violent storyline rather than storytelling itself.

Another way to bring the player into that emotional space is through the use of contrasting visual language. The installation has a familiarity to it, the objects are furniture-like, the rug connects to childhood and the play objects feel nostalgic. But at the same time, something feels off. The objects seem odd, somehow sterile and cold. Looking at the installation feels like looking at a distorted, uncanny childhood memory, where something seems to be missing. While some surfaces feel warm and soft, others feel cold and hard. Since I didn't want to include any graphic visual representation of violence, I focused more on highlighting and simultaneously contrasting the cuteness more indirectly through the overall atmosphere in the room.

The text on the screen narrates the scenario and guides the actions of the player by giving two choices after each paragraph on where to move the object. Visually, it is kept simple, to keep the focus on the physical space and the narrative. The different “checkpoints” from the play rug are used as pictograms on the screen to make the navigation more intuitive.

By leaving vagueness in the writing and the visual language, I want to give the player space for projection. The play rug does read as a play rug, showing a map with familiar motifs, but is still kept non-specific enough to allow very different scenarios to be imagined within its world. It uses archetypal settings rooted in fairytales, myths and nature imagery of northern European landscape. These clichés are already charged with a lot of narrative and thus communicate right away that the rug is there as a storytelling device. The design of the rug is hand drawn in order to evoke something child-like, but also to make visible my own touch, as the starting point for the work is a personal one. It's elevated slightly on a platform, which disconnects the rug from its typical placement on the floor, turning it more into a game board than a carpet to be stepped on, because it's not meant to recreate a children's playroom. The rug becomes a boundary in itself. The work presents the viewer with a set of rules and boundaries which didn't exist when the stories were being developed and they exist because somebody else tested them before. The design of the installation is thought as an added layer of distance, allowing the viewer to take a step back from the play situation and evaluate and reflect on it from a different perspective.

The sound design was done by musician and sound artist Éléa Brando. To go with the overall atmosphere of the installation, it is kept subtle but still carries an emotional weight. It's meant to softly guide the interaction and give feedback after an action has been taken, while not being overbearing, but rather blurring with the rest of the space.

As a method, I often like to build my work around external source material, like in this case the play testimonies. Because often, whatever it is that I want to communicate, has already been communicated very well by someone or something else and I'm not trying to make a didactic work but rather share something that I have learned or experienced. By translating the source material into my own artistic language, I am able to understand and communicate what it is that I am trying to capture.

Especially in a world where we are constantly confronted with violence, whether it's physically, structurally or through depictions in media, I find it interesting to investigate how we negotiate violence through play, in this case using the example of children's play. I believe that play allows us to enter a safe space where we are in

control of how we interact with, in this case, violence, which helps us understand our own relationship to it. The play is used as a lens and gives us some kind of safety net in a subject matter that feels overwhelming.

Overall, with this installation, I want to capture the feelings of friction/desire/contrast/resistance and constant negotiation of one's own emotional state and boundaries that is connected to playing out violent scenarios with "non-violent" toys. While building on my own experience, I'm expanding on this through other people's memories in order to paint a more vibrant picture of this phenomenon. The shape of the installation and the mechanics of the interaction are deliberately chosen to communicate and make tangible a specific emotional tension.

SCRIPT I / OBJECT I

"place an object on  to start"

→ It's a warm summer evening and there is a gentle breeze in the air. You and your friend have been talking about taking a walk through the woods during golden hour to admire nature in the most beautiful light, you've been meaning to for weeks. Although, there have been some weird reports of "incidents" lately... They are probably just rumours though.

→ How does this make you feel?



curious



weary

→ You head into the woods. The golden light doesn't last as long as you thought it would and the shadows quickly grow bigger. It's quiet, too. You become aware of every little sound. You hear a rustle and your friend suddenly stops in their tracks. "Don't follow." But it's too late, you're already looking found.

→ How does this make you feel?



hunted

→ It looks like it's been laid out on the forest floor with so much intention, waiting for you to find it. And arranged carefully around it... are objects you recognise. Things from your home. How did they get there? Who did this? Your friend doesn't say anything. Neither do you.



too much

→ "Wait, is that?" You tilt your head a little. "Oh my god, never mind. Look, it's the way the shadow falls on the tree trunk." You both let out a sigh of relief and a laugh. That's enough excitement for today, so you turn around and start walking back home. The lights are on inside and everything feels warm and safe. You make comfort food and have a cosy rest of your evening.
(Back to start screen)

→ How does this make you feel?

intrigued

→ You hear footsteps. They sound slow and deliberate. "Is this you?" you ask your friend. They look horrified. And then you see it: moving fast between the trees, coming straight towards you.

→ How does this make you feel?



I need to know what it is.



I want out.

→ Maybe if you give it something* it will leave you alone? You make a decision in less than a second. You push your friend forward and run. You find somewhere to hide and you don't know how long you stay there but at some point you hear the horrifying sounds fading. You know that it's too late for them. You wait a little longer, just to be sure. But when you finally start moving, you don't manage to get far before you realise: it knew you were there the whole time.
(Back to start screen)

→ You both start to run and don't stop until you're inside with the door locked behind you. Out of breath, you both fall to the floor. "What happened to you two?" your sister is sitting on the couch. She starts laughing. It was her. She's been planning the whole thing for weeks. It's still too early for you to laugh with her, but you have to respect the dedication.
(Back to start screen)

→ You quickly grab your friend and pull them down onto the floor. Both of you stop breathing, you try not to move, not to make a sound. It passes, close enough that you feel the air move. And then it's gone. You wait and wait until you feel like you can make a run for it. When you finally start running, you don't stop until you get home. At the house, you are welcomed by your sister, who is laughing so hard she has tears in her eyes. Her plan worked. You tell her about the "creature" and she tells you it was probably just an animal that got spooked by the noise. You choose to believe her.
(Back to start screen)



connected concepts

cuteness

The aesthetic starting point for this work is cuteness. As Sianne Ngai describes in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), cuteness is a manipulable aesthetic that always implies a power dynamic: the cute object is soft and vulnerable, and in doing so it invites a kind of domination or care from the beholder.¹ This ambivalence in the way cuteness disarms and enables control at the same time, is what makes it so charged as a framework for thinking about play. In the context of this installation, the cute objects contrast with the violent scenarios they are put in, which is a subversion that is already inherent in the aesthetic itself. This can also explain why the juxtaposition of cuteness and violence is so present in popular culture, like for example in fashion or horror films.

¹ Ngai, S. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2012. p. 3.

narratology

One of the explanations I have found for what makes violent play scenarios so appealing is essentially narrative drive, specifically the mechanics of conflict and tension that are a key factor in most storytelling traditions. In narrative theory, from Aristotle to Joseph Campbell's monomyth and its later reformulations, without conflict there is no story. A more recent perspective on narratology by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) argues that the reader's, or in this case player's, affective engagement, in other words the emotional pull of tension and discomfort, is one of the main drives of a story.² That means that not just resolution but friction itself is what draws us in. The violence in these play scenarios is functions as exactly this kind of narrative friction, it creates momentum and makes the stakes feel real.

² Ryan, M. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. p.p. 140.

safe space / magic circle

In order to let ourselves “fall” completely while playing, we need to be inside of a safe space, this could be our childhood bedroom, our computer, the night, the woods behind the house, anywhere that feels safe to us, physically and mentally. This ensures that the emotional space we are building can’t just suddenly collapse. This protected inner space could be seen as Johan Huizinga’s magic circle: a bounded zone where the ordinary rules of life are suspended and something else becomes possible.³ Contemporary game scholars have questioned and expanded this concept, pointing out that play is never fully isolated from the outside world, but the sense of being held inside of a separate emotional space is still something most players will recognise. In the installation, the magic circle is physically constructed by creating a space that you have to enter physically in order to engage with it and then can be expanded emotionally if the player feels safe and engaged enough.

3 Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949. p. 10.

desire / taboo

What seems to bring up violence in the first place is some kind of desire, not directly as in wanting something we don’t have, but rather something like a curiosity about what it feels like to get close. Desire as thought by Deleuze and Guattari is not an expression of a lack but more generative and investigative, like a productive force.⁴ The force becomes tangible during the play scenario, it is experienced in the body as heat or butterflies or an elevated heart rate. This gets amplified by a hesitation, an awareness of a taboo, that actually doesn’t cancel out the desire but rather amplifies it. Georges Bataille, in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), argues that transgression and taboo are inseparable: A boundary only becomes charged because it exists, and the awareness of crossing it is what produces the thrill.⁵ This is the tension that the installation tries to capture.

4 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. R. Lane. University of Minnesota Press, 1983. p. 26.

5 Bataille, G. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Translated by M. Dalwood. City Lights Books, 1986. p. 63.

projection / embodiment

When picking up a toy, a child is externalising something. Desires or fears that they don't fully own yet get placed on a surface outside of themselves, where they can be looked at and tested from a safe distance. In *Playing and Reality* (1971), D.W. Winnicott describes this intermediate zone as the space where inner and outer reality can be negotiated.⁶ What makes this kind of play so intimate and vulnerable is that the object is holding something that belongs to us. This negotiation takes place inside of the whole body, with movement and physical sensations being an important way of understanding. Winnicott argues that "playing involves the body, because of the manipulation of objects" and "because certain types of intense interest are associated with certain aspects of bodily excitement."⁷ The mechanics of the installation invite exactly this kind of thinking through touch.

⁶ Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock Publications, 1971. p. 20.
⁷ Ibid. p. 95.



on the title

*[...] and my mind is like a hand, it touches rather than thinks.*⁸

The title of the work is a quote from Olga Ravn's 2018 science fiction novel *The Employees*. The story is told through fragmented statements given by crew members of the Six-Thousand Ship to a workplace commission. The ship is currently conducting research on a planet called New Discovery on extraterrestrial life forms, which, because of their resemblance to objects like gemstones or fabrics, they refer to as "the objects". The crew consists of both humans and humanoid androids, and through their statements we witness them negotiating what it means to be human and to be a worker, exploring their desires, dreams and memories through their relationship to the objects, to their work, and to each other.

While the book doesn't relate directly to play, it's a work I keep coming back to because I find that it connects deeply to the questions around identity, desire and reflection that are an essential part of my research.

The humanoid crew members have been programmed to have dreams and memories of Earth, to make them relate easier to their human colleagues, but this causes them to feel an inexplicable sense of longing and loss.

⁸ Ravn, O. *The Employees: A Workplace Novel of the 22nd Century*. Translated by M. Aitken. Lolli Editions, 2018. p. 39.

*I know the smell of oak moss, but I don't know what it feels like to touch. [...] Did the image come up from inside me, of its own accord?*⁹

They connect strongly to the objects, their smell, textures, sounds, temperature, and the energy they believe to observe in them, because it somehow connects to their desire to feel sensations they know exist but have never gotten to physically experience.

I think this notion captures beautifully the sense of desire and curiosity that draws us to play “forbidden things”. Because of external input, we know that certain kinds of violence exist, they exist to us as a concept and we may not even be able to trace how this concept ended up in our heads. The play is a way to get closer to that feelings and to investigate what it is that intrigues us about it, so we project the desire onto play objects.

*“As if they came from our dreams, or some distant past we carry deep inside us, like a recollection without language.”*¹⁰

In the book, it becomes clear that whatever qualities the crew members assign to the objects are a reflection of themselves and their emotions. Re-reading the book through the lens of my own research, I directly drew the connection to a child's relationship to a toy. The toy is used as a projection of their inner world. The way they interact with it can be translated into a question and answer, where the object becomes a vehicle for an answer that is already somewhere deep inside of them.

*It feels like they're ours, and at the same time we belong to them. As if they are in fact us.*¹¹

This kind of play is an intimate experience because it's a very personal process, which is why it can also be tied to shame and hesitation. I always experienced it as something rather intuitive but more subconsciously, there seems to be a reflection around the

9 Ibid. p. 21.

10 Ibid. p. 41.

11 Ibid. p. 95.

relationship to the object and its own agency, amplified through animistic thinking (attribution of life, consciousness and feelings to inanimate objects). This means that children might feel care or guilt towards their toys during play, which adds another emotional layer to the situation.

*When I'm in the room, it feels as if the objects know about these dreams, and I become embarrassed.*¹²

*I get a strong sense of having abandoned the object, of physically having subjected it to pain. And I feel ashamed of myself.*¹³

*Might this object be a subject, and are we then guilty of murder?*¹⁴

The phrase I quoted in the title reflects the urge to enact something in order to bring it from an abstract idea to a concrete experience. This moment presents a risk, a danger, but there is some kind of force that pulls us towards this unknown. The quote directly connects to the mechanic of the installation: The hand moving an object is the thinking, the touch is an investigation. A child picks up a toy without knowing exactly where the play is going, just like the viewer places an object on the rug without knowing how the scenario will play out. That's what this kind of play is: Touching first instead of thinking, and then discovering and questioning through doing.

12 Ibid. p. 35.

13 Ibid. p. 29.

14 Ibid. p. 42.



notes on psychology

Thinking about this kind of play and its meaning ultimately raises questions about the psychology behind it. While I'm not a psychologist, I am a (former) player and I've played with and talked to many other players, which leads me to my hypothesis that the psychological purpose of portraying violent scenarios in play has to do with negotiating and processing the world around us, internalised narrative structures we absorb through the way stories are being told to us, testing out boundaries and taboos in a safe simulated environment and developing our identities.

Though my work is not meant to be a case study in developmental psychology, but rather about capturing a unique contrast and emotional experience within the anecdotes I've collected, I did review some writing in order to better understand whether or not my assumptions go in the right direction according to researchers in the field.

Play being the the space where children do a lot of their psychological work is a well researched and documented phenomenon. This includes, but is not limited to, darker kinds of storylines as well. One of the foundational texts in the field of psychology of play and child development is D.W. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971). Winnicott claims that play is "universal, [...] facilitates growth, and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships" and "can be a form of communication

in psychotherapy".¹⁵ This makes play a very significant area to study in developmental psychology.

As I already laid out regarding the concepts of projection and embodiment, Winnicott describes an "intermediate area"¹⁶ in play where both the inner and outer world are being negotiated. He claims that this is "necessary for the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world"¹⁷. Erik H. Erikson writes in *Childhood and Society* (1950): "I propose the theory that the child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning."¹⁸ In *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), he expands on this and claims that play is also a way to understand our relationships and boundaries towards others, "an infantile way of mastering social experience by experimenting, planning, and sharing."¹⁹ Specifically talking about violent play, Gerard Jones writes in *Killing Monsters* (2002) that some of the essential functions of play are that "it 'explodes' tensions through emotional arousal and make-believe aggression. It provides correctives, happy endings, that help children to believe that what frightens them can be overcome. It helps them navigate their concerns through structures and rules that they can learn and predict and so feel they've mastered. It allows them to manipulate troubling ideas until those ideas become familiar and lose their power."²⁰ Through these perspectives it becomes clear that play is used as a kind of "rehearsal space" for the real world, where children can process their experiences and impressions of the world around them and understand their place in it.

This can of course include the processing of traumatic experiences. When I was first researching violent play scenarios, I came across some forum discussions on CPTSD and how people with trauma remember reproducing through play violence that they themselves had experienced. Not only can observations of violence in play be signs of trauma in children, play can also be used as method in children's therapy, as it's

15 Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock Publications, 1971. p. 79.

16 Ibid. p. 34.

17 Ibid. p. 36.

18 Erikson, E. H. *Childhood and Society*. 2nd ed. W. W. Norton & Company, 1963. p. 222.

19 Erikson, E. H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1968. p. 123.

20 Jones, G. *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*. Basic Books, 2002. p. 101.

an intuitive and accessible way for them to communicate. According to Garry L. Landreth's *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship* (2012), which is the standard contemporary reference for using play in therapy, it's about meeting children in their world, where the natural medium of communication is play and activity.²¹ This doesn't mean that all violent play is necessarily a red flag. In *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Bessel A. van der Kolk talks about how for traumatised children, the world is full of triggers that cause extreme emotional reactions²² and that among the traumatised children he worked with, "none of them seemed able to explore or play in ways typical for children their age."²³ This implies that there should usually be a noticeable difference between "healthy" violence in play and signs of trauma. Through my research I have the impression that violent play is a very widespread phenomenon that is generally a healthy and normal process in children's development.

In *Bad guys don't have birthdays: fantasy play at four* (1988), Vivian Gussin Paley observes that children's play scenarios stem from a mixture of their own experiences and fantasies mixed with common narrative sources like fairy tales and cartoons.²⁴ She talks about how children use "the bad guy" they know from stories they are used to and turn him into something personally meaningful to "diffuse their personal demons".²⁵ This shows that the way we are taught to tell stories becomes a device for exploring our own emotions.

Paley argues that "children use fantasy play to portray fear in order to prove that fear can be conquered."²⁶ It's through being in control that boundaries feel safe enough to push them a bit. Winnicott talks about how "playing implies trust"²⁷ and that "playing is inherently exciting and precarious"²⁸. Play needs to happen inside of a safe space, because the emotional stakes are high.

21 Landreth, G. L. *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship*. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2012. p. 19.

22 van der Kolk, B. A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking/Penguin, 2014. p. 227.

23 Ibid. pp. 221.

24 Paley, V. G. *Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at Four*. University of Chicago Press, 1988. p. 12.

25 Ibid. p. 21.

26 Ibid. p. viii.

27 Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock Publications, 1971. p. 95.

28 Ibid. p. 96.

Inside of that safe space is where self discovery can happen. Erikson argues that play is where children experiment with identity, rehearse social roles, and discover what belongs to them.²⁹ Winnicott, talking about identity, says: "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."³⁰ It's a bold claim that play is the only way to actual self discovery, although I do agree based on the research I've done that it seems to carry a lot of weight when it comes to identity building.

What looking into writings regarding the psychology of (violent) play has confirmed for me is that this kind of play is a common, normal and healthy way to cope with difficult feelings, learn to better understand ourselves and the world and to create excitement by playing out narratively interesting stories. In certain cases it can also be a sign of a deeper trouble, though this is not the case that I am exploring in my artwork.

29 Erikson, E. H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1968. p. 234.

30 Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock Publications, 1971. p. 99.



violence in play culture



bogleech

...

It's so funny how kids who were only given the "girl" toys seemed to frequently develop the most maniacal imaginations. When I was little and I visited friends or family who were little girls they'd have their Barbies involved in ritual sacrifice or human trafficking. They'd have barbie's evil twin drive ken to suicide by poisoning his horse or some shit.

Action figures set up only the simplest kinds of violence, heroes and villains punching or shooting each other over doomsday plots. When you crave high stakes drama as all children do but your characters are all rich suburban women you kinda have no choice but to get pitch dark I think. The only kinds of villains that logically exist in that setting are just so much sicker and nastier than just doctor octopus or something.

post by user bogleech on tumblr.com from November 24, 2022.

In their replies to this post, users recall their own play scenarios:

gecktonurite: thinking about how my ariel doll caught both cancer and aids from falling down the stairs

sin-jpg: i vividly remember playing with Barbies one day and like the plot of the story i was playing was like the bad lady kidnapped my Barbie in her volcano lair then she cloned her over and over and kept ripping apart and vivisecting the clones as sacrifices to this ancient god

blightwulf: mine always had human sacrifices and rituals also I was obsessed with a storyline that involved the mother dying and then a baby being born out of the dead body and having to dig its way out of the moms body

The replies also include a lot of people describing scenarios they played with their siblings, friends or cousins. Playing alone was always something intimate and protected for me, but it wasn't the only space where I would add violence to my games. My sister and I had a few different Playmobil sets, including a horse ranch and a hospital. Naturally, horrible accidents would happen on the horse ranch with people needing to be rushed to the hospital in life-threatening condition. Later on, when we got unsupervised access to computers, my friend and I would meet up to create messed up scenarios in The Sims, the classic drowning them by removing the pool ladder, keeping slaves in our basement where they were forced to make paintings so that we could sell them for money, or a very specific game where we made a group of male sims compete with each other while denying them all of their basic needs. There is clearly just something appealing and fun about violence.

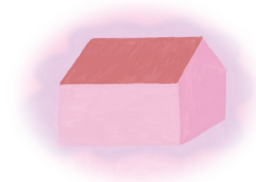
We can see this phenomenon in blog posts recalling childhood memories of mutilating Barbies, let's play videos about staging horrible scenarios in The Sims, or its modding scene, where the extreme violence mod is by far one of the most popular ones. Not only do thousands of people go out of their way to install fan-made mods in their Sims games in order to add more violence to their stories, there are also entire communities of modders who dedicate a lot of time and skill to programming these kinds of mods.

This amount of dedication shows a real desire to portray violence in play and it reaches beyond childhood to adult players as well.



Base piemenu for The Sims 4 mods by modder Sacrificial

The violent play I am touching on with the installation is a more private and intimate one but it's worth noting that adding violence to cute, seemingly harmless games is a widespread cultural phenomenon that is generally talked about in a casual way, something that is just part of interacting with these kinds of toys and games.



conclusion

And my mind is like a hand, it touches rather than thinks tries to make tangible the emotional experience of solitary violent play with cute toys, without necessarily trying to explain it. It asks the player to embody a stranger's memory and to experience the tension of questioning their own boundaries towards this scenario, being informed by their own memories and emotional world. The intentional vagueness of the installation allows for projection and personal resonance. The title already gently points towards an underlying hypothesis, which upon a closer look at play culture and research in psychology is broadly confirmed: Playing, here, is a way of understanding ourselves and our relationship to violence.

During my research I looked at anecdotal accounts as well as foundational texts in developmental psychology, which helped me understand the bigger picture of a personal experience. It is worth mentioning, however, that a lot of my sources are quite old. They are worth looking at because they give insight into the broader context of the play situation I'm describing, but they are often outdated in regards to perspectives on gender and the nuclear family, as well as being written before digital play became a major factor in children's lives. An interesting continuation of the research would now be to look at how play conditions have changed through for example digital games, increased supervision and rising anxiety. My focus with this project was on play anecdotes told by adults, including myself, but what does this kind of play look like in today's children?

With my past and future projects, some of the core themes are identity, self reflection and soft computing, using play as an artistic method, as an emotional communication tool between me and the player. It's a research that has continued to teach me things about myself and how I want to communicate with others. It will continue to stay with me as something personal and formative but also as something I want to share and understand even more deeply, ideally in dialogue with other researchers, artists and players. There is something about the intimacy of play that feels like exactly the kind of relationship I want to have with the people who encounter my work.

In *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* (2009), Stuart Brown talks about how play is a biological necessity that shapes the brain, sustains wellbeing and stays an essential part of human development across the entire lifespan:

When we stop playing, we stop developing, and when that happens, the laws of entropy take over—things fall apart. Ultimately, we [...] become vegetative, staying in one spot, not fully interacting with the world, more plant than animal. When we stop playing, we start dying.³¹

I love the sense of curiosity that feels inherent in play, it's what keeps wonder alive for me. It gives me a lens to look through at everything else, whether it's art, literature, relationships, my memories, my desires, the whole world around me and the ways in which it inspires me.

What is it that makes play feel so sacred, intimate and magical? Where is the spring of this inner creativity we channel so naturally into play? Who is allowed in our play world? What else can play teach us about ourselves and our emotions?

31 Brown, S. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. Avery/Penguin Group, 2009. p. 73.

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