

TELEVISION

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Gerard Jones

Battle-Zord Nu-Nu meets Power Ranger Po

Play fighting with material from the electronic toy box TV

Adults are often concerned about violence and violent media heroes in children's role play. But seen from the children's perspective, play fighting is not automatically to be equated with real aggression.

When we consider children in relation to mass media we tend to define them as consumers, watchers, recipients, or victims. But they are also users of that media: choosers, interpreters, shapers, fellow players, participants, and storytellers. Every story of a superhero or a monster or an angry rapper resonates with the personal stories of its audience. And every one becomes a different story depending on the viewer, the listener, the player. A child chooses a particular movie or TV show because his or her unique story has led that child there. And he or she weaves a new, personal narrative out of the fantasy and play it inspires.

No one has taught me more about this than my son. When Nicky was five years old, and anxious about the imminent end of preschool and the beginning of kindergarten, I tried to bring him the stories that had meant so much to me at similar developmental junctures: first Beowulf, my own favourite in the months before kindergarten; then the Grimm's fairy tales, the Greek myths, the Dr. Dolittle novels. He didn't want any of them. He wanted Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers.

I don't think I enjoyed watching Power Rangers episodes quite as much as my mother enjoyed reading Beowulf to me. I liked the goofy rubber monsters, but the road to their scenes lay through the most agonizing stretches of Saturday morning teen banter. Nicky, however, loved every minute of them, and I loved watching him love them. Every commercial break he'd be running, morphing, punching, kicking, knocking fearsome monsters (usually me) to the ground - with a confidence in his body and a decisiveness in his movements I'd rarely seen in him. I could see his excitement driving the anxiety out of him.



Foto: Der Kinderkanal

ARD/ZDF

Then he found a new fantasy: Teletubbies. That show was just then invading America and finding an audience not only among toddlers and ironic adults but also among countless five- and six-year-olds discovering the regressive comforts of cute baby talk and cuddly hijinx in an underground burrow. Suddenly Nicky and his friends were waddling into group hugs and squealing, "Eh-oh, LaLa" and "Where Po 'cootah?". This, I thought, must surely be the end of the Power Rangers. But not for Nicky. When he wasn't turning into Po and asking for a hug, he'd be morphing into the Red Ranger and blasting a monster. My wife noticed that he seemed to become a Ranger when he felt more sure of himself, a Tubby when he felt a little shaky and needed more nurturing. As the end of preschool drew near, those two contradictory fantasies grew to fill more and more of his playtime.

One morning I woke him up, and as we walked to the bathroom he said, "I want to see more of the Battle Show." "What's the Battle Show?" I asked. He looked at me confusedly. "We were just watching

it!" he said. Then he realized: "It was a dream!" I asked him what it was like, and he laughed and told me: "The Teletubbies were playing on the grass in Tubbyland with their toys. Then these monsters were getting into Tubbyland. They looked kind of like Tyrannosaurus but they were destroying the flowers and windmill things and they were going to destroy the Tubbies' house. So Po touched something on his wrist and suddenly he morphed into the Red Ranger! Then the other Tubbies turned into Power Rangers. Only they were their own colours, so there was a purple Ranger because of Tinky-Winky instead of a Blue Ranger or Pink Ranger. They fought the monsters and knocked them all the way out of Tubbyland, and then they morphed back into the Teletubbies!"

I asked him to draw pictures of it, but he wanted to play-act it instead, and Tubby Rangers quickly became his favourite game. He took it to preschool, where he and his friends added new details: the Tubbies' underground home could rocket into space; the Nu-Nu, their vacuum cleaner with eyeballs, could morph into a Battle-Zord; the television on their tummies would alert them to approaching danger.

Nicky had chosen stories that embraced the extremes of his fantasy life, the most aggressive and the gentlest. Then he'd remade them into what he needed them to be. Now he could be as powerful and fearless as he wanted but not sacrifice his need to be comforted and protected. Red Ranger Po united the most destructive and most nurturing powers in one happy self.



Foto: RTL

Different Eyes

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that young people emulate literally what they see in entertainment: that if they like a TV hero who defeats villainy with his fists, then they must be learning to solve problems with violence. There is some truth in that. One of the functions of stories and games is to help children rehearse for what they'll be in later life. But anthropologists and psychologists who study play have shown that there are many other functions as well - one of which is to enable children to pretend to be just what they know they'll never be. Exploring, in a safe and controlled context, what is impossible or too dangerous or forbidden to them is a crucial tool in accepting the limits of reality. Playing with aggression is a valuable way to reduce its power. Being savage and destructive in imagination is a vital compensation for the wildness we all have to surrender on our way to being good people.

In focusing so intently on the literal, we overlook the emotional power of stories and images. The most peaceful, empathetic, conscientious children are often excited by the most aggressive entertainment. Young people who reject violence, guns, and bigotry in every form can sift through the literal contents of a TV show, movie, or game and still embrace the emotional power at its heart. Children need to feel strong. They need to feel powerful in the face of a scary, uncontrollable world. Superheroes, video-game warriors, rappers, and movie gunmen are symbols of strength. By choosing the symbols that speak to them at different developmental junctures, by working their symbolic power into their own values and self-images, young people add to their own senses of strength.

Adults, however, often react to violent images very differently, and in the gap between juvenile and adult reactions some of our greatest misunderstandings and disputes are born. Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, many toy retailers reported sharp increases of sales of action figures and G. I. Joes. But some of those retailers also began pulling such toys from the shelves, largely in response to parents' request. Newspaper stories reported that many parents were forbidding violent toys and entertainment in their homes as a reaction to the tragedy. One mother reported that she'd hidden her son's toy soldiers in the closet because, "It's bad enough that they see the Army in the airport."

Many of us worried about how we would help children deal with the terror of September 11, but when I went into the classrooms to conduct my Art and Story Workshops, I found that the children were far less shaken than their parents and teachers. (Many others found the same: a RAND Center study subsequently revealed that during the week after the attacks, 90 percent of people over eighteen years old suffered stress reactions while only 35 percent of those five through seventeen did so.) Most of the students I worked with talked about the horrific images they'd seen with a mixture of anger and excitement - a lot of them wanted to tell stories, draw pictures, or play games involving planes destroying buildings or soldiers fighting terrorists. And yet, this was San Francisco. These kids came mostly from politically progressive, anti-war families. When their teachers later polled the students on

how they thought the United States should respond to the terrorism, these same kids voted overwhelmingly against a military response.

There is no contradiction here, and no failure to respond appropriately to tragedy. Play is how children deal with what troubles them. Stories are ways to give a controllable shape to pain and anxiety. Adults are generally more empathetic, more attuned to the greater world, and more literalistic than children. We are more likely to feel the pain and anxiety of real violence when we see it in make-believe. It troubles us to see our children having fun with something that we deplore. We fear that they are celebrating our affirming a reality that we desperately want to banish from reality. We want to mirror our adult restraint, seriousness, compassion, and pacifism. But they can't - and shouldn't - mimic adult reactions. Play, fantasy, and emotional imagination are essential tools of the work of childhood and adolescence.

Little monsters

One of the most common concerns raised by parents and teachers about aggressive entertainment is that it inspires children to play-fighting and more rambunctious behaviour. Hardly anyone who's raised or worked with kids can deny the charge, and the research supports it: In fact, most of the statistical research linking violent television to more aggressive behaviour, which has so dominated our discussion of children's television for decades, has concerned itself not with genuinely hurtful or antisocial behaviour but with mock-aggressive play. The seminal, and most imitated, laboratory study on children and violent television, conducted by Albert Bandura and his associates in 1963, suggested that preschoolers who watch an inflatable clown being punched on television are subsequently more likely to take joyful punches at an inflatable clown themselves.

What is too often left out of the discussion, however, is this question: Is it a bad thing to inspire play fighting?

The child and adolescent psychiatrist Lenore Terr has identified several benefits of mock aggression: "Play fighting helps kids learn their own strength and how to control it. It helps them learn limits and how to observe them. It helps them function confidently in the world - they learn how to handle moderate pain and forgive friends for accidental hurts. It helps them practice being resilient in the face of the real that they're inevitably going to encounter down the road - from schoolmates to unfair teachers, competitive co-workers, road rage. [It] expresses sexual and aggressive feelings, hopes, and terrible frustrations with past or present realities."

Terr has demonstrated how make-believe violence enables children to manage and defuse their feelings by displacing what they want or fear; a child who wants to punish his parents feels safer pounding on monsters as a Power Ranger. Games involving chasing, pillow fighting, squirt guns, toy guns, and sword fighting help kids learn how to judge dangers and take appropriate risks. Jumping into those dangers and coming out unharmed helps them learn the difference between fantasy and reality. Wrestling, roughhousing, pretending to kill ones' friends and family, and all sorts of pretended savagery lift children out of shyness and knock down barriers to closeness. Terr has also suggested that if girls are more encouraged to express their aggressive feelings early through play and fantasy than they have been traditionally, they may be less likely to channel their aggression into hurtful social and verbal conflict later.

Unfortunately, no other kind of play raises the anxieties of contemporary, educated adults as much as mock violence. More and more schools forbid children from engaging in any kind of pretend aggression - and often discourage them even from telling stories involving physical conflict. Many parents try to maintain the same prohibition in the home, or at least greet their children's aggressive play with so much worry and criticism that the children feel badly constrained against it. In such a context, then, might not the mass media be doing children a significant favour by inspiring them to overcome such constraints and play aggressively? Might the Bandura experiment and its successors demonstrate not a danger but a benefit of TV watching?

The educator Vivian Gussin Paley spent years observing the media habits and play patterns of her kindergarten students, at the same time working through her own distastes and discomforts about the violent play of little boys. Television does influence childhood play, she concluded, but in ways more salutary than distressing: "Certainly there is a wider variety of violence pictured today in stories and play, but not more actual fighting. The increase in mock-aggressive fantasy may even lessen the need for real combat. Perhaps when you pretend to fight, you don't really need to fight. Or maybe a superhero doesn't need to prove he is powerful: his label tells the story. A builder, confronted by a collapsed block structure, has no such sustaining symbol of competence."

Paley also noted a remarkable instance of children taking the raw material of television and making it something entirely their own. Some of her students saw a TV commercial for a movie called *Stir Crazy*, a prison comedy starring Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder. From that commercial, nothing but thirty seconds of barely contextualized slapstick snippets, they constructed whole stories and games, an entire style of rambunctiously silly, sometimes aggressive play that they called "stir crazy." Their characters ate gunpowder, mashed food into their hair, "chopped off" their own skin so "their bones stuck out," and jump around crazily after "stirring something." All the while chanting, "Uh-huh, uh-huh, I'm bad, I'm bad."

It was an annoying game, at least to Paley and some of the quieter girls. But it also proved to be a helpful one, a way for the most energetic boys to connect, create, and explore fantasies of destruction and transgression in a safe context. And it showed that what mattered in the kids' media consumption was not the form the creators had intended, for little of what they played had any relation to the original movie, but was instead the fantasy uses to which they put the images they had plucked out.

We will understand the mass media, and their relationship to viewers' emotional and mental lives, much better if we remember that they are not simply sources of lessons and messages. A television show is often far less like a curriculum or a template than a toy box. Its greatest power, especially to a child, may not be its overt content or its overall form at all, but the images and momentary occurrences it tosses up for its viewers to remember, forget, or misremember. The "meaning" of a kids' television show may not be what anyone involved in making it intended, or what it seems to be to the very intelligent adults who pick it apart. Its meaning is the meaning assigned to it by the kids.

And like a toy box, the media's contents can be used in a countless number of games. Some inspire kids to pretend to fight, just as toy swords too. Others, like fuzzy stuffed animals, inspire them to play at nurturing. Others are complex and malleable and suggest many possibilities. Still others may be intended to inspire nurturing but be used by some kids for mock aggression, or the other way around - like the Power Rangers and the Teletubbies in Nicky's mythology. But all are needed parts of the toy box. All are needed colours in the spectrum of play and emotional development.

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THE AUTHOR

Gerard Jones is the founder of Media Power for Children and the author of several books on popular culture. His book in progress is *Men of Tomorrow* (Basic Books 2004), concerning the history and cultural significance of superheroes. He serves on the Advisory Board of the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies Program and lives in San Francisco, CA., USA.

INFORMATION

Internationales
Zentralinstitut
für das Jugend-
und Bildungsfernsehen
IZI

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40

Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79

eMail: izi@brnet.de

Internet: www.izi.de

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