

# Is Alice Still in Wonderland?

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## **Abstract**

Play, defined as an activity engaged in for amusement, is doubtlessly in everywhere: in any kind of real or virtual medium of today's contemporary world. It is the phenomena of which an egg shelled chocolate, Kinder Surprise™ and Çelik™, a robot icon regenerating the identity of a local firm producing electronic products and home appliances, has in common where it begins to penetrate into our lives. As penetrating into every day life and becoming an aspect of it, play gets in touch with design where these two begin to interact.

The aim of this paper is trying to find out what has happened / is happening to play phenomena in relation with design by following its blueprints among children's and adults' 'act of playing' within local and global cultural basis as well as bearing the questions below in mind.

Can we say that play and design have a mutual relationship by which both nourish each other? Where does design stand during play's penetration to life- is it a part of play or a mediator defining the rules of play? Does design use play on behalf of filling our emotional gaps and succeed in it - for example by replacing a real pet within an electronic one? Can play turn out to be something else feeding on today's so-called hyper-real life or has it already turned into one and changed the concept of life within itself where any product has turned into a 'toy' itself?

**Keywords:** Play, Design

## **Introduction**

As I type these lines I am staring at the screen which on the top has a small stuffed deer staring at me at the same time. When I make any spelling mistakes while typing, a small puppy, offering help as an office assistant, pops up on my document. Meanwhile, I also take notes by using my Mickey Mouse shaped pencil. From time to time I check the conference website, where a marble icon, belonging to the plays in the streets, goes on rotating. After some time, I may decide to eat an egg-shelled chocolate that contains a toy waiting to be constructed. Probably I will fix the toy appropriate for "3 and up" year olds. I will surely fit in the "up" part of the consumer age range. Then I may turn on the TV and begin to watch some advertisements in which two rabbits are running a race, the pink one having the long-life batteries will inevitably win the race. After that, a playful robot-the new face of a local company producing domestic appliances will happily sing "Me, Çelik-Arçelik! Who are you?" Later I will probably remember that I have a paper waiting to be finished so I will return back to my work and continue to look at the screen with a smiling deer on top...

All the things which I have used, seen and consumed above have something in common. They contain play element within the very nature of themselves in one way or another. Play, defined as internally motivated activity that all humans engage in from time to time, is doubtlessly in everywhere: in any kind of real or virtual medium of today's world. In such a context, where play penetrating continuously into life will inevitably meet design or vice versa design will inevitably meet play. The aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between play and design – its symbiotic nature within the cultural context of today's life.

### **Nature of play**

As Schiller says in 'On The Aesthetic Education of Man', "For it must be said once and for all that, man only plays when he is a man in the full meaning of the word, and he is fully human only when he plays."

Play is a voluntary activity. In play we deliberately and enjoyably suspend rationality. Play is interactive. Whenever play is occurring, there is some sort of exchange taking place between two entities. For example, when a person plays an instrument, he interacts with that instrument as a part of executing play. When a child plays with his toy, he interacts with his toy as he builds cities or drives his car in his city. Furthermore, it is nothing but interactivity that the play nourishes on in virtual mediums. When a person plays a computer game, all the action is situated around him and the interface. Play almost always has some element of interactivity involved with it.

Play is pleasing. For an activity to be considered as play, usually one or more entities involved are experiencing pleasure or a positive feeling from the play. Similar to the idea of play being pleasing, play is emotionality. Almost every type of play involves some sort of inflection of emotion, whether it is happiness, excitement, thrill, or even tension. Play is usually composed of various emotions, or at least produces emotions that are desirable. Play is unpredictable. One of the reasons that different forms of play are so fascinating to people is because play is usually not a constant and exact phenomenon, there is always a wide degree of variability in what could happen.

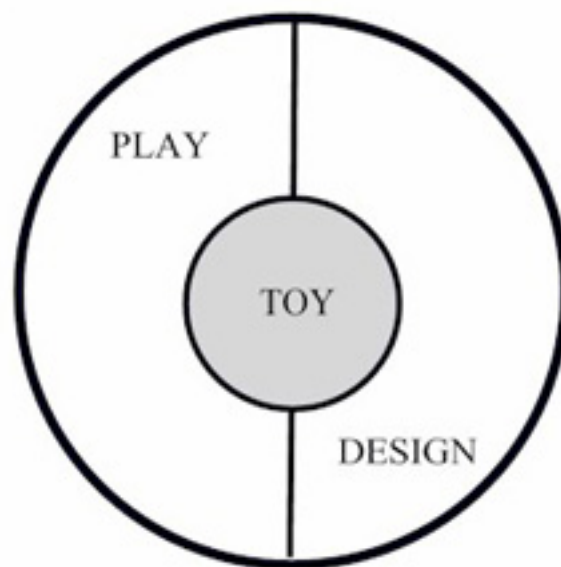
Within all these properties, as Woudhuysen (2001) says, "Play has insinuated itself into the pores of everyday life as the direct outcome of the need people have for community, safety

and security in a world that is seen as fragmented, stressful and dangerous.” However, play is by no means just escape, but can also be a dramatic commentary on reality and a heightened re-enactment of communal traditions (Lasch, 1979). Within this context, play causes experience- an experience of self-actualization, self-definition and self-recognition.

### **A symbiotic relationship- Play and design**

Symbiosis, coming from sumbios, meaning living together, is a relationship of mutual benefit or dependence. One of the main considerations of this paper is to name the relationship between play and design concepts as a kind of symbiosis. The mutuality of this relationship can be argued about but it is obvious that these two concepts interact within each other while defining the human self as the subject of the act. The relationship between the two will be examined within two levels throughout the paper.

Firstly, when design and play concepts meet and interact, the outcome of this relation is a product. This product, which may be defined as an object for children to play with, is the toy.



**Figure 1**, The trio: Play-Design-Toy

The amount of play and design concepts’ effects on toy phenomenon may be viewed throughout the history of toys. At first, before any sign of industrialization, toys have been handmade artifacts of crafts, made out of wood, stone or any found object of material

cultures. In other words, according to Benjamin (2001), every toy in any population has been the yield of home industry. Within technological improvements, industrialization, social changes, the nature of toy phenomenon has dramatically changed.

According to Levy (1988), toys were first in “wood age” till the medieval times. Then “tin age” came after. In United States, “iron age” survived until the middle of nineteen’s, Second World War Years. After Second World War, “plastic age” began and replaced the toys made out of tin, iron and wood with plastic ones within the capability of mass production of cheap toys.

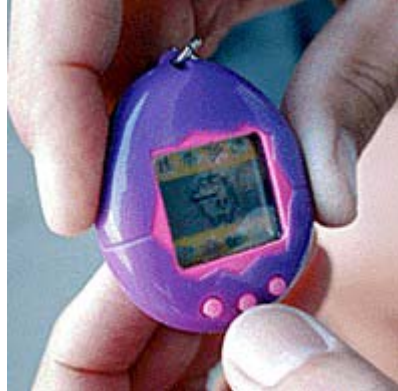
For present, we can add a new age to the list as the “electronic age”, where many kinds of different production techniques and materials are used. Toys belonging to present have never been that much alive (!), where they totally change the concept of play.

At first, toys were the miniaturized replicas of every day life objects booming out within the capabilities of industrialization. Naturally, they were representations presenting the likeness of everyday characters and objects such as little houses, table wares, dolls, soldiers, cars and etc. They have borrowed the visual characteristics of everyday products and the act of play has centralized on role playing. Mimicking everyday object within the act of “as if action” has formed the essence of play.

As the time passes, within technological improvements and social changes toys begin to change visually as well functionally. They begin to have a new visual language including colorful and large scaled, interpreted features besides still mimicking the every day object where they gain a new visual identity. Within this new visual identity, forms and colors have been interpreted in the name of player- the child.

Briefly, at the first level of play and design’s relationship, toys have been the designed products for play where their utilitarian cause of existence is nothing but to be played with. Throughout time, the nature has been changing due to the changes in play concepts and society’s realization of play. The toy itself begins to transform into becoming a play thing more than just a replica toy.

For example, within the distribution of Tamagotchi to the consumer market, in Nineties, the notion of a doll or a stuffed animal has dramatically changed. Tamagotchi became a plaything, which interprets the very concept of “taking care of”.



**Figure 2**, Tamagotchi

The concept of “taking care” such as feeding, playing with, taking to the doctor have been re-interpreted within the possibilities of virtuality where a different interface comes into action within a touch of buttons.

Furthermore, as interactivity and virtuality are considered, Nintendo game boys, Sony play stations, Nokia’s new release N-gage have become the play object of the contemporary world, meanwhile revolutionizing the identity of toys without sharing any visual clue of former ones. Their cause of existence depends on the possibilities of software where at this stage interfaces mimic the real life objects and situations.

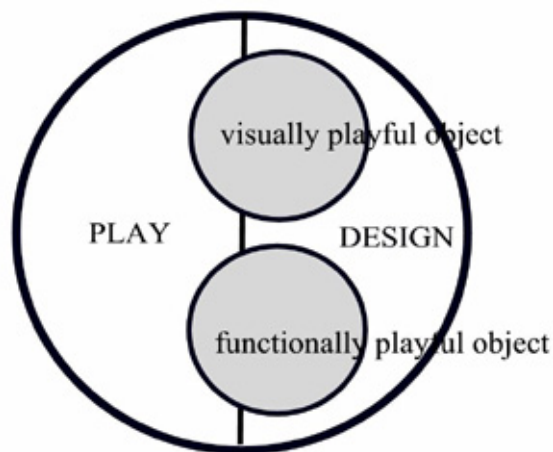
Virtuality and Interactivity (which the play thing becomes interactive itself) become so common for the play concept that the object of play gain a new clueless visual identity and shift the state of representation of real life situations within a wide range of simulation where the reality is redefined and the player immediately gets the outcomes of his act of playing virtually as if real.



**Figure 3,** Play objects of virtuality and interactivity.

### **Playful objects**

At the second level of the relationship between design and play, design emulates play by the help of toys and cartoon characters of the entertainment world. The emulation has two types; visual and functional.



**Figure 4,** Second Level of Play and Design Relationship.

For the functional emulation the result is the object which is functionally playful. In addition to the main function of utility, notion of play is used as an additive function, though such an object may not give any visual clues of emulation to play. A cellular phone might be a good example of this kind of object since its cause of existence is to communicate but it contains interfaces of some games where play becomes an add value for the product.

For visual emulation, representations occur, new meanings like “as if “are loaded into the product. As Sturken (2001) says, “The material world only has meaning, and only can be ‘seen’ by us, through the systems of representations. This means that the world is not simply reflected back to us through systems of representations, but that we actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems”.

The object, reason of emulation, has a utilitarian function as a table, a telephone, a toaster or etc, but visually it functions as the promise of play, ready to turn into a play object anytime. As Heskett (2002) says, “Particularly in establishing a philosophy about the role objects should play in people’s lives. An example is in the field of domestic electrical appliances, such as toasters, kitchen mixers and hair dryers. These are in fact used for only few minutes in any day and the question of what role the forms should play in the long intervals when they are not used is pertinent. With more assertive visual elements, with a range of organic forms and bright colors, implying that such objects serve a more prominent visual role in the home when not in use.”



**Figure 5,** Toasters of the Disney world.

When the cartoon characters of Walt Disney and such examples are considered, design uses these characters within the basis of their iconic values. Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh or Popeye, becomes an icon, “an image that refers to something beyond its individual components, something that acquires symbolic significance” (Sturken, 2001). The cartoon character as media commodity-as a product of entertainment industry itself, can be

infinitely reproduced for mass consumption with such a consideration where also the product itself intends to function as a ‘household icon’.



**Figure 6,** When a cartoon character becomes a household icon.

As the designed object, which can be called as the ‘playful’ object, reproduces continuously, “the commercial and cultural values of plastic lend itself ideally, then to its use as an outer casing. In terms of many domestic consumer items such as radios or hairdryers, it clothes internal workings, and perhaps only indirectly tells us something about the functioning of that object. Elsewhere, it is used to mimic graphic imagery. Thus in children’s toys, it is often used for cartoon characters. The loss of a sense of internal structure is compensated for in plastic by the adoption of vivid colors or suggesting shapes. Not only is plastic a material of invention but it is also a material of representation” (Julier, 2000).



**Figure 7,** Koziol Products as a material of representation.

“Postmodernism, which emerged in the 1980s, emphasized the semantic value of design, rather than its utilitarian qualities. In other words, it is the meaning of a product rather than the uses to which it is put, that is primary criterion in conception and use” (Heskett, 2002). Though the meaning of a given product, may not be easily read since the meaning may



depend on the context in which it is situated, as well as to the cultural and personal background of interpretant.

In other words, “Products are meaningful because they refer to carry a meaning given by culture or an individual. Cultural meanings are understood similarly by the majority of people in the same community (although their preferences for these meanings may be different). Personal meanings are constructed through experiences, and products are associated with them. All these products represent or refer to something outside the product itself” (Battarbee et.al. 2002).

On the contrary, according to Heskett (2002), however, it is not user, who is the focus of these concepts, but designers, which opens the door to products taking on arbitrary forms that may have little or nothing to do with use, but are justified by their ‘meaning’.

## **Conclusion**

As Baudrillard says in *Consumer Society* (1998), we are living the period of objects: that is, we live by their rhythm, according to their incessant cycles. During life among these “incessant cycles” of objects transforming rapidly, design has a main role in forming the so-called cycles, as design creates new contexts for experience, rather than just products. In such a diversity, which products are conceived, designed, perceived and consumed, will inevitably provide multiple perspectives from which they can be understood and interpreted. “People express values and attitudes- their selves-with the kinds of products they select for themselves, their home and their environment” (Csikszentmihalyi et.al., 1998). Toys and ‘playful’ products, bearing play element within the nature of themselves, surely take their places in this selection as the notion of ‘self’ is being reminded. In today’s world of commodities, these objects become ‘twenty first-century treasures’.



**Figure 8**, Little Treasure Cupboard by Johann Georg Hainz, 1966 and Twentieth-century treasures from the Collection of Museum of Modern Mythology.

We load these objects with new meaning. Toys as well as serving for play, can become the subject matter of possessing, where they become the reminders of the story of their acquisitions. Thus, the object becomes the clue for recalling and retelling the story of the collector's personal history of times places, by which he discovers the childhood toys which have been forgotten.

As well as possessing toys, we love to possess playful object by which they communicate to us "with an immediacy and directness that is not just visual, but can involve other senses" (Heskett, 2002). Within social, technological and economical changes, play element will surely define new potentials and continue to penetrate into everyday life by changing the concept of life where any product may be capable of turning into something else reminding play.

Surely, Alice is still in Wonderland. She will not come back, even if she gets older and becomes adult, since the Wonderland will keep up being promising of play by the help of design.

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