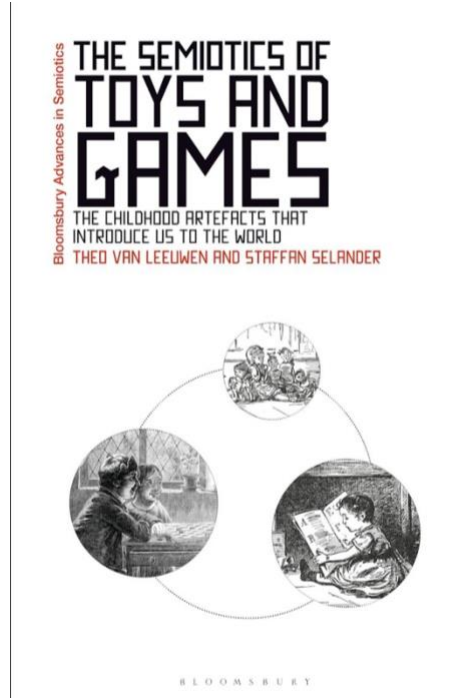


Theo Van Leeuwen and Staffan Selander, **The Semiotics of Toys and Games: The Childhood Artefacts That Introduce Us to the World**, London, UK: Bloomsbury, 236 pp., \$35.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Based on updated research observing and interacting with children as they play with toys or games, this book offers seven chapters of mini-studies about baby toys, teddy bears, miniatures, Barbie, building toys, war toys, digitized children's stories, and how games like chess, *Monopoly*, and *Minecraft* encompass rules, options, and the teaching of choice, moral or otherwise. The chapters are standardized: Each offers a brief cultural history of the kind of play object in question, a short framework of how the authors understand the various toys as "making meaning in the context of social practices" (p. 163), a close reading of how toys have particular design and material qualities that affect play, a few comments on how toys are marketed and their appeal to parental purchasing, a short study of children using the toy(s) under question—usually conducted by the authors—and a conclusion about the ways that the toy phenomenon is embedded in social change through how children learn to be members of their homes, schools, and eventual workplaces and cultures.



The structure of the book, of course, necessitates sacrifices in depth of analysis, and some chapters are more compelling than others. But in general, it will be a valuable text for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in Education, as well as professionals obliged for Continuing Education. Moreover, it is quite useful as a Communication and Media studies book for those who wish to guide studies in meaning potential, affordances, and how social practices are constructed, constrained, and made when an object (or digital game) lands in users' hands. This reviewer will definitely be using chapters of this book to frame ideas in research work and to teach students what affordances are and how they are arguably at the center of human creativity and cultural change.

The introduction and the appendix are useful explanations of the method-driven theories of how to understand what people learn by living and using objects and media in their environments. These chapters make clear how to examine the complex relationship between meaning potential and activation potential. Meaning potential is about how historical or cultural particulars are part of the toy in the present; a toy's association with relationships (to parents, teachers, peers, etc.); and a toy's connections to lived experience—all are overlapping and make rich sets of potential meanings. The activation potential can then be determined by how these means are brought forward by actual users. The framework is terrific for teaching because we do not use everything we are given in the way the maker intended, and in a strong

sense, much of human creativity arises from diversions of an object's (or even an idea's) original purpose/intentions. To have this illustrated in multiple chapters with varieties of users is quite enlightening and fun to read about.

The best chapter for this reader was "Rules of Games and Social Life" (along with the chapter "Building Toys: Elements of Construction and Their Meaning"). It starts with Vygotsky's and Piaget's ideas about how in school ". . . play becomes socially and authoritatively regulated" (p. 143) and that play also socializes pleasure. By age 11 or 12, children begin to grasp rules as mutual consent in play groups, by negotiating rules and developing approaches to the understanding of the logic of games. The chapter's illustration of these ideas starts with a history of marbles and how marble games involve naming, color, feel, outdoor environments, and a great deal of complex motor skills development. The authors point out how games of marbles had varying rules by local adaptations around the world because of the ways individual peer groups engage in mutual consent decisions. They also discuss similar ideas in chess as evolving from a war game to one of abstract strategy, where thinking skills arise out of sets of rules that one overtly learns. But the chapter then takes an eye-opening turn by turning to *Sim games* and *Minecraft*—games which seem full of infinite possibilities but do not, in fact, operate socially and functionally the same way unmediated games do. First of all, to learn these games, one does not start from abstract rules and the extended engagements of learning how to deploy either tactile skill (marbles) or strategic thinking (chess), but rather gameplay relies on trial and error (or cross-marketed influencer videos that show one how to do specific things). Another central difference is how in those games, the dominant cultural order is baked into system's architecture even. They analyze within *Minecraft* how Barthesian myths of the American frontier fantasy structure the activities, decisions, and logics of the game (or in *SimCity*, the logic of urban development and paradoxical impetus to keep taxes low). Meanwhile, the user receives no deeper information about logics of the science or social science that originally seems to have informed game design; and importantly, players are unlikely to negotiate any kind of creative rule formation with peer groups. There is even a fascinating mini analysis of how proscribed choices in both online games and board games are connected to socialization of children in (for?) late capitalist life. The implications of this are reiterated in the concluding chapter, when a perplexed *Minecraft* player says "What happens if I kill a villager?" (p. 169), hovering over moral consequences while suspended between gameplay options, affordances, and meanings. This kind of material richly illustrates the stakes of games for children's sociocultural lives within the design affordances and marketing of new games.

One of the best things about this book is that it deals frequently with multimodality in its analysis so that the reader can imagine/critically examine actual play and how sound, touch, color, temperature, moving and static images, color, paint, size, and so on, all are part of the holistic experience of play. (They rightfully point the reader toward Maria Montessori's theories of sensory development [p. 168] and warn us that in a digital play world, we must make sure that our children still engage in material play for sensory and fine motor development. The authors also remind us a few times that interactivity is also key to child development, and this point was not lost on this reviewer in the chapter on Digitizing Children's stories. In this chapter, there is a study in which *Cat in the Hat* is reduced in digital form to monotone reading style and point-and-click user interfaces that cannot attain anything near the functional sensitivity one needs to discuss word, picture, and meaning with a curious child (pp. 133–134). Portions of the chapter simply perplexed the children, who turned away.

Another strength of the chapters and the conclusion is that, when appropriate, the authors raise questions about what cultural transformations can be seen in how we use and experience new toys and games. They highlight how, in a recent social transformation from a world where adults were adults and children were children, to today, parents and children now tend to share cultural ideas through mythic story worlds that are cross-marketed commercial entities created by Marvel and Disney. Importantly, they do not rail against contemporary media and its presence in Western life, but rather they point out the advantages and disadvantages of toy design and user experiences, suggesting the need to figure out better toys and stronger design, and asking that we question deeply what kind of culture we want to socialize our children to. Although not an advanced theory kind of book, its concrete explanations, descriptions, and direct qualitative study methods create an inspiring and idea-generating read for future critical work in marketing, branding, mediatization, social change, and education.

There is one criticism about the book's historical material. Each chapter at some point draws liberally on older anthropological works, mostly mid-20th century, and picks and chooses to assert supposedly illuminating contrasts between pre-modern and modern peoples. These items are thankfully generally only two or three sentences and are frankly not even well-knit into the contemporary histories that follow. But they almost force the reader to think (fallaciously, I would say) of humankind as evolving through games and toys, which is certainly not the point of the book.