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Populating the Universe: Toy Collecting and Adult Lives

Kristen N. Bryant, Denise D. Bielby and C. Lee Harrington

Introduction

Two decades ago the study of *Star Trek* fans by Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) launched the analysis of fans' interpretive communities by scholars within the US. These foundational works, along with Joli Jensen's (1992) penetrating insights into cultural assumptions about fans in general, established the importance of studying fan cultures in order to understand the legitimacy, meaning and significance of fans' practices. While this early scholarship focused on the specific forms of social interaction between fans in order to document the existence of fan communities and locate those communities relative to mainstream society, the wealth of fan research that has been produced since then has focused on how fandom is integrated with modern life (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007). Still, there remains considerable work to be done on fans' individual motivations, enjoyment and pleasures that, according to leading fandom scholars, includes 'furthering our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world' through participation in fan communities (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007: 10).

Our chapter focuses on how fans' collecting of cultural objects contributes to scholarly understanding of the culture of fan communities. We focus, in particular, on how adults – those 18 and over – who are fans of toys – action figures like G.I. Joe or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and other toys such as My Little Pony or Hot Wheels – describe their interests, attachments and practices associated with these cultural objects. Adult engagement with children's toys is understudied (but see Jenkins' [2011] discussion of his return to comic books to cope with personal trauma), as is collecting behaviour, which usually focuses on acquisition of a particular object (see, for example, Robertson 2004, on adult women who collect dolls). Collections of cultural objects tell personal stories (Kopytoff 1986; Prescott 2012), and the act of collecting feeds personal creativity and imagination (Turkle 2011). In order to further our understanding of collecting behaviour, our particular goal is to explore the ways in which adults who collect children's toys understand their interest as an adult activity and as an aspect of their adult lives.

Our interest in collecting behaviour is motivated theoretically by how the concept of play provides insight into the activities of fans and their practices within fan cultures. Play is 'the laboratory of the possible' where the individual can 'step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life' (Hendricks 2006: 1). Pioneered by the Dutch social philosopher Johann Huizinga (1955) in his treatise *Homo Ludens*, play is social activity that is driven by interior, phenomenological satisfactions that need no ulterior

motives (Hendricks 2006). As the “‘imagination’ of reality’ (Huizinga 1949: 4), the social manifestations of play include its freedom (it is voluntary, not an obligation or duty), its ‘stepping outside’ of real life (though as a serious endeavour), its limitedness (and yet its endurance through memory and as something that can be enjoyed and experienced again another time), its necessity for order (the impulse to create orderly form) and its tension (a desire to achieve something that tests the player’s prowess).

Each of these social manifestations is pertinent to collecting behaviour, although they have yet to be fully brought to bear upon scholarly understanding of it. Instead, the study of collecting is scattered across a range of academic disciplines (business, literature, psychology, feminist studies), with findings that speak to their respective interests. Most studies focus on collecting particular objects (such as dolls, as mentioned above) or target specialised properties of the object of interest, such as, for example, the ‘fashion’ doll (Peers 2004) or the Barbie doll (Lord 2004; Rand 1995; Rogers 1999), historic or vintage stamps (Gelber 1992; Super and Carlson 1942), or original editions of *Little Golden Books* (Cassidy 2008). Other studies focus on the process of collecting itself, such as the point at which objects become valued as collectables (Danet and Kariel 1994; Pearce 1994), how collectors’ different goal orientations affect the act of searching (Baker 1996) or how a collector’s activity as an acquisitive and possessive behaviour complicates family dynamics that compete for the collector’s attentions (Belk 1995).

But how is collecting behaviour to be understood as the play that is seen in fan cultures? What is the psychic basis for its interior, phenomenological satisfactions? For guidance on these questions, we turn to the pioneering work of Winnicott (1953), who identified the importance of transitional phenomena such as toys to psychic development in children. In subsequent work Winnicott (1971) clarified that the imaginative play with cultural objects that begins in infancy and continues through childhood forms the all-important basis for the intermediate or ‘in-between’ realm of experience where the individual maintains a simultaneous presence in external life and internal reality.¹ Although Winnicott (1953) assumes that the activity of negotiating the boundaries of inner and outer realities is a universal and life-long endeavour, there is debate amongst fan studies scholars about whether object play in adulthood is the same as the experience with primary objects in childhood. Hills (2002, 2007) argues that adult play is ‘communal’ and thus a secondary experience and while intensely emotionally charged, is different because it is culturally based and inter-subjective. Sandvoss (2005, 2008) and Silverstone (1994) conclude that attachment to secondary transitional objects in adulthood is regressive in that it invokes the primary experience. Complicating resolution of this debate is that in adulthood, activity in the transitional realm tends to be confined to culturally legitimate domains such as the arts, religion, philosophy and so on, or concealed from others. To do otherwise in Western cultures, particularly in the US, raises concerns about arrested development, because when adults retain the objects of imaginative play associated with earlier stages of the life-course, they put themselves at risk of violating normative cultural expectations about psychological maturation.

1 The psychic pleasure that comes from playing in an imagined world is at the core of foundational scholarship on fan practices (see, for example, Lembo and Tucker [1990] on television fans, Harrington and Bielby [1995] on fans of American soap operas, and Hills [2002] on media fans in general). Each of these works demonstrate how through the insights of the branch of psychoanalysis known as object-relations theory, the subfield that is concerned with exploring the relationship between real, external people and internal images, fans experience pleasure through ‘knowing play’, a cognisance that manages their simultaneous presence in external life and internal reality (see, also, Rayner 1990: 60).

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Given our interest in understanding the place of play in fan cultures, our analysis probes how adults who self-identify as collectors of toys complicate the societal presumption that adult engagement with these cultural objects is something one 'grows out of' with age. We do so, focusing on how the practices amongst adults who collect children's toys pertain to imagination and play associated with early stages of human development. In short, we aim to further understanding of how adults' intermediate realm play is associated with forms of play that occur earlier in life (Bollas 1992).

Evidence

Our evidence comes from interviews with adult attendees of two fan conventions in Southern California that attract toy collectors: San Diego Comic-Con International and BotCon. San Diego Comic-Con International is a major popular culture convention that originated 42 years ago as a comic book venue, but has since expanded into an industry-organised event to include other content, including animation, television, films, video games and toys. It meets annually in Southern California, has become a significant marketing platform for Hollywood and currently draws approximately 130,000 attendees. BotCon, a Hasbro-sponsored convention devoted to Transformers toys and assorted media, is much smaller by comparison and moves to a different location every year. The year our data were collected it was held in Pasadena, California. Access to convention settings is limited to those who can afford to attend and sometimes, as in the case of Comic-Con, by the space limitations of the convention facility itself. Attending a convention can be costly, and in addition to the price of admission (in the case of Comic-Con, \$200 per four-day weekend, with tickets selling out a year in advance), participants must pay for travel, lodging and meals, and any purchases they make at the convention itself. BotCon was \$20 per day with walk-ins available at the door.

Twenty-two participants were interviewed altogether, a few individually, though most in small groups of between two and seven. Potential interviewees were approached by the first author while waiting in line for various panel presentations, based on visual and/or auditory cues alluding to an interest in toys. Participants included convention attendees, a toy vendor and the author of a toy encyclopaedia. In addition, a panel promoting an upcoming documentary film about collectable toys was recorded. The majority of participants were white, male, between the ages of 18 and 55 years old, and from a roughly middle-class background. While this may ultimately also be true of the larger community of adults interested in toys, this selection is not a representative sample, nor was it intended to be, as our research was exploratory.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for a flow as organic as possible and to not lead participants in their answers. The questions used to guide the interview covered topics surrounding *which* toys were of interest to participants, *what* it was about the toys that drew in the participant, *where* the toys fit into their lives and *how* friends and family viewed this interest. This approach allowed us to gather information on what people do, and insights into what they think they are doing and why they are doing it. Recorded interviews were transcribed, and pseudonyms were created to assure the anonymity of the interviewees.

We conducted an inductive content analysis of the transcripts for recurring topics, and after documenting their prevalence, noted that age emerged as a prominent theme amongst participants. We then extracted all portions of the interviews where age, aging, generations, childhood or children were mentioned, and then organised these references into conceptually

relevant categories. Ultimately, we sought insight into the relevance of age to adult fans of toys and how they understand the meaning of their interests to their adult lives.

Analysis

The potential for enriching one's fan interests is almost limitless, and priceless, inside industry-organised conventions like Comic-Con or BotCon. Attendees are able to meet product creators and producers, see the latest developments in a product or the introduction of new ones, learn of change in a product's business or production context, gain insider access to a production context (if lucky) and exchange specialised knowledge or expertise with other fans. It is a given that participants are able to engage in opportunities and experiences with other attendees knowing that they don't have to account for their presence. This kind of shared understanding contributes in fundamental ways to the total experience of attending a fan convention, and it comprises a central part of a fandom's *lingua franca*, the language based upon the common knowledge of why they are there. While not all fans have the same kind of interest or level of expertise, they know that this 'common baseline' (Alex, white male, age 25–34) enables them to differentiate amongst themselves and find others with the same level or degree of fascination. Within the toy fandom itself, those who collect tend to be more deeply involved with toy culture, and those who collect in order to resell at a profit are a subset of these. Fans recognise the difference between those who are interested in collecting for their own personal use versus those who are collecting to sell, and draw upon these and related insider distinctions to determine how they share their interests with others:

I, you, know, I have friends who are interested in this stuff but aren't necessarily collectors ... so they- they know kinda what fandom is ... or appreciate the fact that you're collecting, or again, when- when someone doesn't know what it is and you can display it in your home, they'll be more interested in, I think, it hanging on a wall than, y' know, 'Oh, let me show you this box of stuff that I have-'. (Derek, white male, age 35–44)

It goes without saying that fans know all too well that outsiders do not always understand their interests. When asked about outsiders' reactions to avid collectors, one interviewee offered with little prompting:

Oh, they think it's crazy. Yeah, no, nobody gets that. (Fred, white male, age 35–44)

The Matter of Age

Age *per se* matters to the toy fandom in a number of crucial ways, and we elaborate three of them here. A readily apparent first way is *when* a fan is introduced to the world of toy fandom. Not unlike other fandoms, entrée tends to come through exposure to the interests of others in one's social world such as older siblings, or a spouse. One collector described how he was introduced as a child to adult toy play by his father, while another discussed how he is now passing on *his* interest to his own children:

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Well, my dad is a Star Wars fan, too, so I've been goin' to science fiction conventions, with him, since I was a young boy, and a lot of those toys are just original to my childhood and even from before I was born, when he was collecting 'em, and stuff like that. (Ethan, white male, age 25–34)

And my kids and I play down there together, so we open up the toys together, and we take stuff out, and put 'em up, and ... Uh, my old- youngest is eight and is kind of is into it now, and can tell all about, 'Oh, this character does that', and 'What does this Green Lantern do?' and 'What's that story?' And it's fun for us. It's kind of a togetherness, father-daughter kind of thing. So it's- it's fun. (Alex, white male, age 25–34)

A second way age matters is that it can define 'generational boundaries' that arise because of the way the toy industry and its ancillary products and markets have evolved. For instance, in the 1980s, the ten best-selling toy lines were all based on children's television shows (Barbaro and Earp 2008); in this era, cartoons often preceded the introduction of toy lines, hyping children, and introducing them to characters and storylines that would in turn encourage viewers to collect the associated figures – as well as everything from themed lunchboxes, backpacks and pencil cases, to toiletry kits, underwear and nightlights. This continues to be a popular marketing strategy, though the minor detail of which precedes which (television programming or tie-in products) may vary, and often these cartoons introduce action elements that modify the originating concept of the toy:

So I have a very hard time with cartoons that my kids watch. Like, even the Spectacular Spider-Man cartoon that was out like a year or two ago, was awesome. I love that cartoon. But it's guns. And it's the intent to kill, and they're not little guns that come out with little splats on the end. They're guns. Like, Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends [in 1981], didn't have it. They didn't have it. (Brad, white male, age 25–34)

A third important way in which age matters is in the way it is employed by adult toy fans in referencing how their physical manipulation, use or play with the toys they collect differs from what they did with the toys as a child, what their own children do with them or what they otherwise conceptualise to be 'kid-play'. There are several dimensions to this. Asked what draws adults to toys, some answered that it was play itself:

Um, it's the play. It's the – like, it's the excitement of being a kid, opening up the toys, the excitement of being a kid, making up your own adventures, not wanting to let that go. It keeps you young, it keeps you young. (Brad, white male, age 25–34)

There's some toys I just gotta break 'em out and play with 'em. Like I got Gizmo over there from Necca. So he's comin' out the package. I wanna- I wanna play with him. I wanna put the glasses on, give him his little Comic-Con bag, and be cool about it, y'know. (Steve, white male, toy producer, age 25–34)

At times this adult play takes on a fairly simple form. Referring to He-Man, a participant says:

I, uh, heh, y'know, move 'em, y'know, fly him around, put him together. The whole complexity of the process – I like that, too. I mean, that's the adult part to it – is being fascinated with the process of how the toy gets made. (Brad, white male, age 25–34)

For others, adult toy play goes no further than the extent of displaying them. When asked 'what they do' with the figures they have procured in adulthood, a pair of Transformers fans offered the following:

To look at. Yeah. They're on my office shelves. (Adam, white male, age 18-24)

They get transformed every once in a while to switch things up. (Brian, white male, age 18-24)

But for most, one of the richer aspects of mature play with toys entails a fascination with their aesthetic elements – their construction, their smell, or aspects of their design – that stems from erudite familiarity with toys that comes out of experience with them:

For me it's some of the artwork and the detail- ... and the process that it takes to just- ... (Derek, white male, age 25-34)

For me [as a toy reviewer], the whole love of Transformers has always been about the engineering of how they make this turn into this. That's the fascination for me. And th- And part of the reason that I like being ahead of the game on some of them, is because, if someone else gets it, and shows off how it works first [e.g., on YouTube], I don't get to have that experience of playing with it, and I can't stay away from watching someone else play with it – y'know, like, I have to know. (Dave, white male, toy reviewer, age 25-34)

Finally, one fan recounts the importance of smell for his eight-year-old daughter as well as himself:

My eight-year-old's barometer for how good a toy is, is what it smells like when we open the package ... Yeah, she's like, 'Oh, dad. That's good plastic. This is a good toy, isn't it?' I'm like, 'Let me see. [sniffs] Oh, yeah. This is good stuff' ... Smells are important ... It's like the same quality of smell when you open up an old library book. (Alex, white male, age 25-34)

Populating the Universe

At the crux of adult play with toys is the question why adults collect. Here, what age is becomes exceedingly complex as a contributor to behaviour because the relevance of age is more than just a set number of years that mark one's time since birth. Age is, instead, a life *stage* that reflects one's accumulated life experiences that have become embedded each within the other as one moves from one period in life to the next. In that progression, concrete experience is not incorporated just as it happened; rather, it becomes transformed by its context, then as well as now, by the other life experiences that surround it. Thus, the contribution earlier life experience makes to later life consists of a complex assimilation of the past into the present. However, that assimilation may not be a straightforward accommodation by the present, because an individual's self may have its own agenda or purpose in how it uses the past in the present. A factor affecting the form the past takes and how that form is assimilated within the context of the present is the emotional valence associated with embedded experience. Those valences can foreground or push to the background the contribution and significance of assimilated experience. Amongst our

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participants, positive affect was highly significant to being an adult fan of toys; fans are collectors in large measure because of the strong, positive emotional attachments they have to their past experiences with toys. There is a *nostalgia* – a bittersweet longing – about their previous experiences with treasured toys, and when fans spoke of these experiences they revealed nostalgia's deep significance to their fandom:

I think that's why it's somehow- it taps- nostalgia taps into a very deep, kind of 'heart' of it. Which, I dunno, I- I think it is someth- something to do with- definitely to do with aging. It's like, we're going in one direction, but nostalgia is kind of pulling you back, in the other direction, isn't it? It's returning you, to an ear- an earlier time in your life. (Martin, white male, toy encyclopaedia author, age 40–54)

Uh, I think it's the whole, uh, thing when we were kids. Uh, especially me; I was a kid in the eighties. But um ... at that time, I mean, toys were fun – you wanted to go out and you wanted to get them. (Steve, white male, toy producer, age 25–34)

Mine is more like childhood memories, too, like with the Super Mario Brothers, and the Yoshis, and the, y'know, like Tetris stuff ... Like little things that remind me of how I grew up. (Ingrid, Asian female, age 18–24)

I think, uh, yeah, they're stuff that I remember ... um, y'know, from my childhood or- or further on – stuff that I just really like a lot. Plus, I- I have a feeling that a lotta other people like it a lot, too, so we seem to do well [with the toys his company produces]. (Steve, white male, toy producer, age 25–34)

Yeah, if you- Yeah. Watch something that I like, and then that makes you- you want to get, like a favorite character ... or ... you then see- Maybe it's not even a favorite character; you see a particular image that makes you think of that show, kind of sums it up, and they're like, 'Yeah, that!' 'Cause then you can look at it all the time and think of that episode, that season, or that ... (Ginger, white female, age 25–34)

Clearly, nostalgia is very important, but it was the *intensity* of nostalgia that was a particularly significant aspect of fans' desire to collect. For our participants this drive was close to a compulsion, and it appeared in two ways. The first was as unrestrained enthusiasm about play with toys, much of which is reflected in many of the above quotes from fans. The second was these fans' fervour over populating the universe of their toy collections. For some, their approach to acquisition targeted particular characters or themes, where partial or incomplete collections were acceptable; for others it was 'completionist' – the need to acquire everything related to an interest. Speaking of how populating their collections gave them enormous feelings of accomplishment, fans said:

I think it makes you feel more a part of that universe, or whatever. I mean, like, the ships you can sort of see, or- I mean, not like play with them or anything. You're just like, 'Oh, that's 'sposed to be what Han Solo flew, and blah-blah, blah, and ya' know, smuggled in this, or whatnot' ... It's somewhat an extension of me, and so I just feel it, y' know, when I want something and I think it's affordable – or decent-. (Ethan, white male, age 25–34)

I-I like what I like, and if I can buy it, I buy it. I'm not necessarily a collector of one thing ... -And you may want that ... or something like that. And then you feel, y'know ... bigger. (Derek, white male, age 35-44)

If I see a nice figure of a character that I absolutely love or adore, I'm gonna own it at some point or another. (Edwin, white male, age 25-34)

We have one bedroom that's just Transformers. Nothing else Shelves in the centre, shelves all the way around the walls, shelves in the closet. Everywhere. (Greg, white male, age 25-34)

We keep a- We keep a few that are boxed; not very many. Usually if we keep something that's boxed, it's because we've bought a second one, so that we can open it, and touch it, and stuff. And the biggest problem that we have - like when we go out most places - is, if he goes by himself, he tends to be more 'in the moment' of exactly how much money he's spending that day. And ... We have a- one friend that used to run a Japanese import shop. And he always preferred it when I came in, with my husband, because we would be going, 'Do I want one of each, so I can display them separately, or do I want two of each, since they combine, and I can display 'em combined?' And I'll let him debate it for a couple minutes, and then I'll walk over, 'Okay. Dear, if you spend- Yknow, if you buy all four of 'em that you want today, you're gonna spend about \$350 total. Today. If you have to buy the two of them on an aftermarket, later, you're gonna spend \$350 on each of those two toys. How much money do you want to spend?' (Fran, white female, age 25-34)

We were at Walmart, and we found like one, and it was like, 'Oh, man. There's only one'. Okay. Am I gonna pose 'em, combine - what am I gonna do? And we actually asked the person, 'Can you check the back, just to see if there's any more?' They're checking, they come out, and it's like, 'There's no more, but according to the computer, it says there're several. We can't find 'em anywhere!' Look up on one of the racers, up above, and there's probably eight or nine. And it's like, okay - we bought them all! (Greg, white male, age 25-34)

Finally, an interesting aspect of nostalgia that arose for some was that nostalgia is not always what *actually* happened in their childhood but what *could* have happened or what *did not* happen. So their compulsion to collect a particular kind of toy as an adult is a surrogacy of sorts, a supplanting of a cherished memory from childhood, or the creation of one from an experience that did not happen. One fan said:

The fav's are gonna have to be- And there's a real reason and a story behind this- I do, y'know, collect model trains and stuff, too, [as an adult] because my dad has always been into model trains. He would use my hand, when I was like three months old- and so- to use it to control the model trains. So I was controlling trains before I was walking. When- after [my husband] and I, y'know, were doing more with Transformers and stuff, the very first Transformer that I bought, myself, at a garage sale, was- I found a loose Astrotrain. (Fran, white female, age 25-34)

In sum, the association between nostalgia and a compulsion to collect remains to scholars an elusive but powerful aspect of toy fandom. Although fans may not be able to express in precise terms how these two aspects are linked, by reading across what they have to say

I-I like what I like, and if I can buy it, I buy it. I'm not necessarily a collector of one thing ... -And you may want that ... or something like that. And then you feel, y'know ... bigger. (Derek, white male, age 35-44)

If I see a nice figure of a character that I absolutely love or adore, I'm gonna own it at some point or another. (Edwin, white male, age 25-34)

We have one bedroom that's just Transformers. Nothing else Shelves in the centre, shelves all the way around the walls, shelves in the closet. Everywhere. (Greg, white male, age 25-34)

We keep a- We keep a few that are boxed; not very many. Usually if we keep something that's boxed, it's because we've bought a second one, so that we can open it, and touch it, and stuff. And the biggest problem that we have - like when we go out most places - is, if he goes by himself, he tends to be more 'in the moment' of exactly how much money he's spending that day. And ... We have a- one friend that used to run a Japanese import shop. And he always preferred it when I came in, with my husband, because we would be going, 'Do I want one of each, so I can display them separately, or do I want two of each, since they combine, and I can display 'em combined?' And I'll let him debate it for a couple minutes, and then I'll walk over, 'Okay. Dear, if you spend- Y'know, if you buy all four of 'em that you want today, you're gonna spend about \$350 total. Today. If you have to buy the two of them on an aftermarket, later, you're gonna spend \$350 on each of those two toys. How much money do you want to spend?' (Fran, white female, age 25-34)

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In sum, the association between nostalgia and a compulsion to collect remains to scholars an elusive but powerful aspect of toy fandom. Although fans may not be able to express in precise terms how these two aspects are linked, by reading across what they have to say

it becomes apparent that collecting, guided by notions of how they engage with toys in imaginative ways that go well beyond playful manipulation of toys themselves, is, for many, a process guided by an intense valuation of the past.

Conclusion

We conducted this exploration in order to more fully understand the nature of adult play in fan cultures. To that end, we examined how adults who collect children's toys use them in their lives. By focusing specifically on adult collectors of toys intended for children, we were able to more systematically explore how adults relate to cultural objects that are designed to stimulate the imaginative play of younger age groups. Thus, what becomes relevant in adults' understanding of their interests is how their appreciation of toys as adults is similar or different from how they engaged - or could or should or would have engaged - the same object, or other treasured objects, as a child. There were several interesting aspects to this. One is that they frame their interests in terms of age, such as the age at which they were introduced to a toy, or in the case of parents, how they are introducing their children to toys. Another is that when adults raise the matter of age, they tend to do so in generational terms that include whether their play was what they themselves did with a toy as a child, or whether the marketplace for toys has changed the imaginative possibilities of play with a toy beyond what they knew as children. These invocations of age by adults when discussing their interest in toys suggests a duality in their sense of experience with toys, an experience that is on the one hand similar to what a child encounters and on the other hand is different *because* of age. Finally, adults bring an erudite, age-related accumulation of knowledge about a toy's aesthetic elements, including its circumstances of design or manufacture, to their appreciation of toys as objects of play. It is uncertain to what extent these considerations are aspects of what matters to children when they play with toys, and that is worth exploring further.

Perhaps the most intriguing findings from our exploration were how adults draw upon their collecting practices and their knowledge of the unique features of individual items to fill out - to populate - their adult worlds of toys. We would argue that collection practices are an understudied and yet important aspect of adult imagination and play, given the obvious pleasure our participants expressed about filling out their collections, often compulsively and with considerable passion. Augmenting this is collectors' close attention to detail - how the facets of a particular item complement, complete, or augment those of all the others in the toy world they are creating - and how *that* relates to their goal of mastering all the components of a universe and knowing everything about it, as was observed in their quest for complementarity or comprehensiveness across a theme or a set of toys. Then there is the matter of how collectors use the physical space of fan conventions as a 'safe space' for expression of their interests - the very toyness of toys - where they do not have to hide or rationalise those interests; this is pertinent to Winnicott's (1971) formulation of imaginative play as a life-long endeavour and the unresolved debate over it. Toy conventions are attended by fans that collect objects intended for use by children, and the reason the convention is organised opens up interesting considerations about what fans seek to accomplish in convention spaces as ancillary to play and imagination. To what extent other convention sites serve the same purpose could prove a worthy and important area of observation. Finally, it is apparent that adult intermediate realm play is more complicated than that of children. As we have observed elsewhere (Harrington and Bielby 2013), without a consideration of aging itself - without situating theories of child development alongside

theories of lifespan development – we cannot fully grasp how adult intermediate realm play compares to that of a child (Bollas 1995).

Lastly, scholarship elsewhere points to the increasing relevance of the study of fan cultures for furthering insight into twenty-first-century adulthood and aging, and in particular, the ways in which fan interests contribute to the structure and dynamics of the twenty-first-century life-course (Harrington and Brothers 2010; Harrington and Bielby 2010; Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2011). Leading social theorists have argued that the institutional pillars that have traditionally structured the life-course are destabilising, and that as a result the trajectory of individual lives is better understood as increasingly shaped by personal interests as well as established institutional mandates (Bauman 2005, 2007; Beck 1992, 2000; Giddens 1991; Settersten 2008). Scholars are also increasingly interested in the extent to which the expression of fan interests that have previously been understood as activity traditionally associated with childhood and adolescence should also be regarded as an important facet of adulthood and later life (Harrington and Bielby 2013). In short, to what extent do fan interests now provide a point of reference for adults and the elderly to navigate the life-course? In this regard, we conclude with the account of a collector of video games who said the following about the significance of his fan practices:

Each item taken on its own can't tell an observer very much: it's just another hallmark of an age where technology changes year on year and in which linen closets fill with cast offs as we move from one shiny thing to the next. But together they are my collection. Together, they tell me where I started as a gamer, and where I am now ... Doesn't it make you feel ... complete? (Prescott 2012: 2).

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