Fictional Plays Broadcast on YouTube: Meet the Playmobil Family

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The 2.0 web, also called participative web, is rife with pro-amateur productions, including some created by children who have access to connected devices like laptops, tablets, and smartphones. This paper focuses on children's web videos which depict them involved in fictional plays with toys, primarily Playmobil. These kinds of videos share strongly normative displays like home-made introductions, descriptive video titles, temporal formats, and channel fiction internal coherency. Children's play web videos constitute a permanent archive of game practices, which differentiates them from offline game practices which are mainly transmitted via oral culture and consequently have limited traceability. The publication of these videos, initiated by the children themselves, allows their game practices to exist beyond their bedrooms and playrooms. This case study aims to demonstrate that web videos are indeed media of play culture [Brougère, 2005] but also witness culture of convergence with the incorporation of external elements from other media and multimodal communication to sustain the channel. This contribution is extracted from ongoing research regarding learning game play through web videos in which YouTube video content is analysed, including the comments section. Videos were selected of users fitting specific profiles (French-speaking child under 16 years old without adult participation), toys (Playmobil), and a predetermined number of channel subscribers. A video corpus was created, composed of nine channels. Given the importance of the context, play videos were not segregated from other videos on the channel, like FAQ videos, DIY videos, etc.

On MussoMusso's YouTube channel, a video entitled "L'anniversaire de Léa" (Léa's birthday) sets up four Playmobil characters with a Playmobil house in the background. Musso, the young girl who creates the video, orally titles her video and continues:

"First I'm going to introduce you to the characters; the father is called Bastien, the mother, Sonia, then little Lea, and little Caramel, let's go!"

She punctuates each presentation with gentle movements to place the character at the centre of each frame. The image is generally unstable. She then cuts the shot and allows her fingers to appear in front of the camera lens. The video immediately continues with the father and mother talking in the kitchen. The characters are static, Musso produces the dialogue herself.

"Honey, it's our daughter Lea's birthday soon." The father replied, "But I know she is called Lea (exasperated breath)."

"Waf, waf! (dog tongue sounds)". The mother screams "Shut up, Toffee!".

Another scene, viewed slightly from above, follows the exchange. The mother is in the living room, near the dog's basket, and she calls, "Toffee, heel, right now!" The following shot shows the dog in the basket, emitting plaintive squeaks.

<div align="right">Extract from L'anniversaire de Léa, Musso Musso[1].</div>

MussoMusso's channel is one of many dedicated to Playmobil on the YouTube platform. Mostly run by children, theses channels stage Playmobil stories and adventures, through short videos, which are primarily recorded at home. The children create their own histories and scenarios using personal toys, cutting and splicing their rushes together to create coherent videos. Arguably two 'cultures', which social sciences researchers have associated with juvenile practices, coexist in the production of fictional plays with Playmobil filmed and broadcast: "screen culture" and "bedroom culture".

As Dominique Pasquier and Josiane Jouët (1999) stated after a national study, young people develop what they call "screen culture". The characterization of younger people's culture continued with "bedroom culture", a phrase coined by Sonia Livingston (2002). "Bedroom culture" describes the growing importance of digital uses, by younger people, within a domestic environment. Sylvie Octobre's work (2003, 2004) explores family dynamics around digital objects, focussing on intra-family negotiations necessary for young people to assert their digital autonomy. Indeed, access to equipment (camera, telephone, computer, etc.) dictates children's habits.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61ffiPybsag

Fictional plays are mostly private taking place between children in a playground or in the privacy of a bedroom. Fictional play web-videos constitute a permanent archive of game practices and share strongly normative displays like home-made introductions, descriptive video titles, temporal format, and channel fiction internal coherency. All these elements invite an understanding as to what kinds of play culture are displayed; convergence culture with the incorporation of external elements from other media and multimodal communication to sustain the channel.

Robin Bernstein introduces the notion of "play script" (2009):

The term script denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but, rather, a necessary openness to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation. When I describe elements of material culture as "scripting" human actions, I am not suggesting that people lack agency. Rather, I am proposing that agency, intention, and racial subjectivation co-emerge through everyday physical encounters with the material world. I use the term script as a theatrical practitioner might: to denote an evocative primary substance from which actors, directors, and designers build complex, variable performances that occupy real time and space. [...] That which I call a "scriptive thing," like a play script, broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable. (Bernstein, 2009, 68)

Through the analysis of a particular children's book and arcade photographs, Bernstein shows that toys, or a background set, contain a script, i.e. a defined usage and set of representations - this notion enlightens the phenomenon of fictional play videos.

This paper develops, firstly, the dramatization of everyday life in Playmobil web-videos and, secondly, focuses on the question of material and media culture.

Data collection methods

The results presented are extracted from a Master's Degree research program which explored the dramatization of plays on the Internet. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the statements presented are more a series of hypotheses than actual conclusions.

Channel's name	Sub-scribers	Produc-er's name	Age	Gen-der	First con-tent published	Number of videos
Playmo-bil_Tuto&Film	42K	Lauryn	15	Girl	August 2012	275
Romain	20K	Romain	12	Boy	February 2014	379
MussoMusso	1K	Rebecca (?)	9	Girl	Décember 2013	48
PlayWithCamille	3.3K	Camille	10	Girl	January 2016	90
Kingsolaya	12K	Sophie	12	Girl	July 2015	30
Lola !!!	2.5K	Lola	13	Girl	July 2016	17
Lounaplaymobil	587	Louna	12	Girl	August 2015	37
Roxymovie82	925	Roxy (?)	13	Girl	May 2015	7
Les histoires d'Océane	9028	Océane	12	Girl	April 2015	176

The data analysed was based on 1059 web-videos, extracted from nine YouTube channels selected dependent on; the producer's age, the absolute non-participation of an adult, and the subscriber's number - to avoid the selection of only popular channels. The participation of an adult was sometimes difficult to ascertain; indeed, the last line of the table is in red due to the late realisation that an adult was involved in the creative process.

Reaching children through the Internet to carry out research is problematic, however, interviews were conducted with two producers of Playmobil web videos, girls, aged 12 and 15 years old. While these interviews may be insufficient to produce strong research results, nevertheless shed some light on certain production dynamics.

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Dramatization of everyday life

Channel	YouTube	TV serie	Events	Dailylife	Holidays	Action	Unclassifiable	TOTAL
Play-mo_Tuto&Films			34	77	26	16		153
Romain		9	12	77	44	93		235
Play-withCamille			3	34	3	12		52
King-solaya	1	1	1	11				14
Lola !!		1	1	5		2		9
Loun-aplay-mobil				4	2	2	5	13
Rox-iemov-ie82				3	1	3		7
Musso-musso		4	3	7	6	3		23
Les His-toires d'Océane		1	6	23	4	11	1	46
TOTAL	1	16	60	241	86	142	6	552
Percent-age	0,1	2,9	10,8	43,6	15,5	25,7	1,08	99.68

Table 1 : topics present in the videos studied

The video corpus examined revealed that 43.6% of the material selected was about everyday life - for eight of the nine channels, it is the most significant content. The locations are primarily the familial home or classroom, occasionally a

school or family trip. Given the producer's socio-demographic profile, in the corpus, it is unsurprising that everyday life was the primary frame of reference. Indeed young girls, who are encouraged to play with everyday objects and situations and naturally engage in interpersonal relationships, are the main creators of these web videos, as opposed to boys who are arguably motivated by war games (Brougère, 2003a). The term "frame" is used purposefully, since regular routines structure many of the web video stories: sleep or meal times are present in 71% of the 'Daily Life' category.

Despite its apparent triviality, daily life content is overtly dramatized. Conflict, fights, punishment between family's members, friends, classmates or money and social distress are included in these web videos.

Conflicts between children and parents display obvious patterns: the child did something wrong, had a bad attitude, or the parent did not appreciate the language used etc,, The young video producer may dramatise events from their own experiences, those of their peers, or create stories initiated by audience requests Fights between brothers are often regarding perceived authority or the sharing of space and resources, whereas, conflict between friends is primarily about trust and envy.

A child may include elements, into their plays, from observation or direct personal experience. During one particular interview, Marine was with her parents, while they appeared talkative and often interjected, allowed their daughter to build on her own memories:

> Interviewer: Do you talk about things that happen to you?
>
> Marine: Sometimes, yes.
>
> Marine's father: Like fights.
>
> Marine: Yeah, fights, but not that much.
>
> Marine's father: I remember some conflicts you told us about.
>
> Marine's mother: Bullying too…
>
> Marine: But that wasn't happening to me.
>
> Marine's mother: Yes it was not but you've heard about it.
>
> Marine's father: At school.
>
> Marine: Yeah, I heard about it.
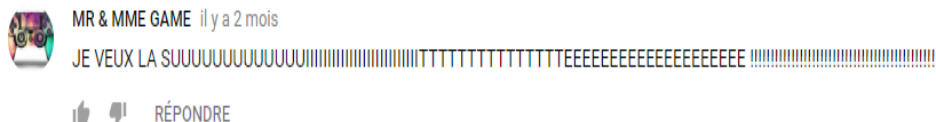
Interview Marine, 12 years old girl.

Irrespective of the dramatised conflict, it is invariably resolved by the end of, or in the next, episode – if in a serialised format. The resolutions tend to follow a prescribed pattern; awareness of the conflict's causes, a specific solution, and moral lessons learnt by the protagonists.

Extraordinary events, such as travel, provide realistic material to be incorporated into the fiction. Though no reproductions of an actual trip were found in this study's dataset, elements from various outings were incorporated in the videos. For example, one episode of Laurie's Playmobil family story, introduced details about the use of coins during a camping holiday.

> Interviewer: By the way you made a video about camping; it was with your PetzShop, does that means you have been camping?
>
> Laurie: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: I was wondering since you were very specific with the coin story.
>
> Laurie: (laughing) Yeah absolutely, how could I have known?

Interview Laurie, 11 years old girl

The action/adventure category, of the video corpus, included stories with the following structure: initial scenario, a disruptive element, adventures, resolution and an epilogue. Two series of MussoMusso videos follow this format, taking place in a fairy universe with princes and princesses. On the whole, daily life videos follow the traditional action/adventure story structure, presumably due to the influence of children's cartoons which adopt this narrative scheme and consequently simple to understand and implement, and affords story serialisation.

Serial format

The serialising of Playmobil stories may create viewer anticipation as they wish to know what happens next to the protagonists:

MR & MME GAME il y a 2 mois
JE VEUX LA SUUUUUUUUUUUUUUIiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE !!

👍 👎   RÉPONDRE

"I want to know what happens neeeeeeext."

Review from the video - On Va Avoir Un Bébé 1/2 [2018][2]

The work of Anne Besson (2004) describes how 'seriality', or "serial narration" - a series of independent scenarios - may involve cyclical narration i.e. episode series based on the same scenario. In the corpus, serial narration is the most frequently used format, with episodes broadcasted more or less regularly.

The nine channels selected for this study have similar content - beyond the theme – and often framed by a generic which present the same Playmobil protagonist and characters in a video series, producing a fictional internal coherency.

Story titles permit easy theme and series identification, while numeric identifiers – for example, 'Episode 1 Season 1' - allows the producer to alternate stories.

> Interviewer: Are you aware of viewers' demands?
>
> Marine: Oh yes.
>
> Marine's Father: I can confirm. If we do not listen to them, it's the flameware[3].
>
> Interviewer: Like they're unhappy?
>
> Marine's father: I think so, obviously they follow this format. I don't watch Playmobil videos myself, but other producers adopt this format - they don't show their hands in the video.
>
> Marine: I'm putting my hands when I'm playing alone, I don't have to think about my hands… I tried to do the same in front of the camera but… (she remains quiet),
>
> Interviwer: The viewers don't like it?
>
> Marine's father: My god no, not at all.
>
> Marine: So now I make cuts[4] in the video, cutting is right.

Interview Marine, 12 years old girl

Marine's father is clearly aware there are specific audience-approved techniques to producing videos - to which he and his daughter conform to avoid

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq0-T0yi5pc&t=81s

[3] Indigenous term ("engueulade" - pronounced with emphasis) which means a fight through negative comments.

[4] 'Cutting' is a technical term used in the video editing process.

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'flamewares' (negative comments and conflict). It is noteworthy that although he is familiar with the norms which govern production: "…,obviously, they follow this format", he claims not to watch Playmobil videos. To accept his claim assumes viewers have made similar comments about particular details i.e. the visibility, or not, of hands in videos. Viewer's feedback tends to normalise content, however, the YouTube system permits observation of a child's video content and processes as these evolve over time.

Material and media culture

Toy's affordance

In addition to similar format or differing video norms, particular storylines reoccur: holidays spent at campsites, hotels, or the family home. While a child may have experienced these locations, their narrative may be enhanced or constrained by the Playmobil at their disposal since the toy is sold in themed packaged sets. The limited variety of themed play sets along and the norms in using the YouTube platform tends to result in children producing similarly scripted material, this in addition to the toy's affordance. The affordance may be defined as including the toy's physical attributes and user's perceived cultural propositions i.e. all the actions which may be performed with the object. A Playmobil figurine is unable to spread its arms horizontally (and other motion and geometric limitations) as well as the affordance of the thematic set.

Modifications and mix

The required realism and limited diversity of the Playmobil system was fundamental for the young video producers since it is difficult to physically modify the various action figures or tools, the producers naturally resort to innovation.

Extract from Roxy's video5

Media consumption and integration in Playmobil web-videos

A specific though uncommon video model was found within the study's video corpus - 3% of the video studied - *mise en abyme*. This formal technique involves duplication of an image or concept within itself; a play of signifiers within a text, of sub-texts, mirroring each other. Playmobil video stories in which the action figures themselves, are making a film or video.

An illustration of this video technique was created by Kingsolaya, a 12 year old girl video producer, in which her main fictional protagonist became pregnant. Immediately on return from the maternity ward, the protagonist shoots a "maternity haul" video - a popular style of YouTube video displaying all the recent acquisitions for the baby, for example, a cot, clothes, etc.. The action figure is shown talking to an audience about their shopping.

> That's it, YouTube. I will show all the stuff I bought for my baby, I will open my channel. Let's go. That's so great. "Hello everyone, I just gave birth to a baby girl and I will show you all I bought. A pink high chair with a little bird. A little play carpet with pink fishes. A pink bed. And a changing table. Here you go. See you." I'm too lazy to cut all this, pfff.

Extract from the video "la naissance de Salomé"6

While the conception and delivery is depicted in the girl's fictional play, arguably the level of detail regarding maternity accessories and the manner of

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5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5hDNi6SS6o&t=82s

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-BMQNBYKvI

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talking to an audience interested in maternity items, may appear surprising. Though perhaps understandable considering the number of famous women on YouTube - followed by a young audience - who fall pregnant and adapt their online content due to their life changes, including maternity haul videos.

Perhaps young girls who followed these women on YouTube for their makeup tutorials, for example, are remixing (Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn, & Bishop, 2013) by interpreting through their own frames of reference and subjectivity, the content they view. Children using digital media are often active subjects, they are critical observers; they have critical distance, about the content.

Young video producers appear to not simply reproduce or imitate, with their toys particular media content. On occasions, the child may possess limited memories about a show they are attempting to interpretively recreate. For example, one study participant conducted a video based on the television show 'Supernanny'[7]. She was asked:

> Interviewer: The awful little girl in your first episode, her name's Peggy, is she from a 'Supernanny' episode?
>
> Marine: Mmm… Nop.
>
> Iinterviewer: Oh, you invented her? Same thing for Jean-Pierre - the one who insults his mom and bites her once?
>
> Marine: Nooop, I invented, that's too gross for 'Supernanny'.
>
> Marine 's father: I bet there are kids like this in the show.
>
> Marine 's mother: We saw it, sweetie.
>
> Marine: You're right, I remember one who was putting his middle finger up.

Interview with Marine, 12 years old girl.

Clearly elements which are introduced in Marine's 'Supernanny' video are a bit fuzzy and her recollections differ from that of her parents. The problematic child depicted in her video was not an exact representation of a child present on the show, but rather an amalgamation of various bad attitudes displayed during the television program and re-enacted chronologically in her narrative. Marine's 'Supernanny' is structurally similar to that of the television show: family presentation, explanation of the difficulties with the child, observation time, rules enact-

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[7] Supernanny is a popular reality television show featuring families experiencing behavioural difficulties with their young children.

ment, 'Supernanny' examples, 'Supernanny' leaving, parents facing their child, the return of 'Supernanny' and the review.

Replicating the television show structure creates a suitable framework on which to base the web video. The video represents original contents though loosely based on observed media material supports the relevant notion of "play script", as described by Robin Bernstein. The child's narrative is supported by media content, what is significant in the fiction, or, the spectacularization of the play (Brougère, 2003a), is the correct identification of the characters (like 'Supernanny'), their function (a strict guardian), and the relationships developed ('Supernanny' is the authority figure).

Conclusion

The themes and stories children developed, as captured in this study's video corpus, are arguably influenced by scripts pre-existing in the Playmobil package designs and the toy's affordances. These dramatized narratives are often in response to the demands of the video's audience, constrained by the toy's inherent limitations, and strategies employed to overcome the drawbacks. Playmobil web videos appear to draw on the child's personal experiences, observances – through various media channels and real-life – and invariably include a moral lesson to be learnt.

It has been noted that YouTube video technical processes may influence these video productions as well as reality television shows – this screen content may inform the reception by children. Children do not tend to passively assimilate the content, but rather re-interpreting and repeating, enhancing the material with their own fictional elements. William Corsaro developed the concept of "interpretive reproduction" (2011), i.e. the children's capacity to be an active member of society :

> I mean interpretive to suggest the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society, and, in fact, children as young as two create and participate in their peer cultures by appropriating information from the adult world to address their unique peer concerns. I mean by reproduction the idea that children do not simply internalize society and culture, but they actively contribute to cultural production and change. I think the two words of the term together also imply that children are—in their very participation in society— constrained by the existing social structure and by processes of social reproduction. That is, children and their

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childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members (Corsaro 2011).

Thus the notion of "interpretive reproduction" finds a particular resonance with the research presented in this paper, given the child has an active participation, and an active function, in society.

Fictional play videos broadcasted on YouTube reach beyond questions of numeric traces and visibility of domestic practices, but may enlighten observers on child cultural construction. Likewise, fictional plays on YouTube are not analysable like a real witness of what occurs in the privacy of a bedroom. If, as Stephen Kline states, "Children have an internal fantasy and internal dialog very elaborated" (Kline, 1995, 142), Playmobil videos are not the means by which to observe this phenomenon, on account of the strong normative displays discussed in this paper. However, Gilles Brougère asserted, "Playing with a toy, it's receive through an artefact complex cultural data, interpret them, and produce a new cultural action, which, even if it reacts to the object's prescription, is always a singular production in a specific context." (Brougère, 2003a, 323).

This exploratory research presented highlights that Playmobil fictions constructed, filmed, broadcasted by children are composed of various cultural elements, from numeric entertainment culture and social, familial, and technical contexts.

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