

**Conference report of the international conference "Playing with history. On the Material Culture of Toys and Games as Representations of the Past" in Salzburg from 13 to 15 November 2019**

by Antonia Grage and Tomke Jordan (both Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, [regionalgeschichte@email.uni-kiel.de](mailto:regionalgeschichte@email.uni-kiel.de))/ translated by Marco Freitag (University of Salzburg/ Department of History) from h-soz-kult: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8581>

Toys as omnipresent historical-cultural products and games as everyday practice shape the lives of children and families. Games and playing in their various forms are therefore of particular relevance as possible mediators for historical images and narratives. The resulting question concerning the influence of toys and games on the perception(s) of the past was addressed by the international and interdisciplinary conference in preparation for a toy exhibition planned for 2021 in the Salzburg Museum (for older children and adults) and in the Spielzeug Museum (for infants). Both the conference and the exhibition aim to provide possible answers as to how the past is represented in games and toys since the post-war period and what references can be made to historical sources and narratives. In his opening address, conference leader CHRISTOPH KÜHBERGER (Salzburg) presented the concept of the exhibition planned in cooperation between the Salzburg Museum and the University of Salzburg with the working title "Playing with History". The exhibition is intended to capture the historical dimensions of board and parlour games, play figures, role-playing and computer games based on three generations of toys and put them into a play context. For each generation of games, a theme is brought into focus, which, however, cannot be assigned exclusively to the respective generation. Therefore, flowing transitions are to be clarified by retrospectives and outlooks. The selected three toy generations are divided into the 1950s/60s (Indian-themed world), the 1970s/80s/90s (knights and pirates) and the generation from 2000 onwards, where princesses, as well as computer games, are to be in the foreground.

After the opening by the director of the Salzburg Museum MARTIN HOCHLEITNER (Salzburg), the director of the toy museum KARIN RACHBAUER-LEHENAUER (Salzburg) and CHRISTOPH KÜHBERGER, who described games as a "constructed visualisation of the past", where ideas about the past were generated, the first panel followed, outlining the theoretical foundations. CHRISTIAN HEUER (Heidelberg) made the start and described toys as projection surfaces for and as stagings of historical images that, however, with regard to the discussions of New Materialism, had no agency of their own. It is rather about how toys and play worlds are perceived by the recipients. Heuer hence spoke of "paradoxical play worlds" that stage the past but could never depict it. This was followed by remarks by PASCALE HERZIG and CHRISTIAN MATHIS (both from Zurich), who examined playgrounds as places of cultural practice and as mirrors of society and outlined their transformation since the beginnings around 1900. But playgrounds are also historical-cultural manifestations and

may sometimes offer possible constructions of meaning (Sinnbildungsangebote) in the form of historical and iconic clichés. Ethnographic observations of children showed that they were less creative in their play on playgrounds with specific designs, such as pirate ships, whereas playgrounds without clear motifs were more likely to be redesigned for their playing purposes. The factor of creativity in the combination of playing medium, players and playing in practice was also discussed in the talk by JÖRG VAN NORDEN (Bielefeld), who distinguished between creativity and predestination and free and imitative play. While strongly predestined toys such as construction kits or dolls would primarily aim to pass on the social construction of reality to children (playing "like"), less predestined toys would offer the possibility of "misuse" and the training of creativity (playing "as if"). HEINRICH AMMERER (Salzburg) then talked about archetypes as historical-psychological moments, drawing exemplarily on the mythological theme of the hero's journey, which is often found in literature and the media. He presented four archetypes, many of which would occur in fantastic narratives and thus find their way into figurative play: There would be a change from the Uroboros to the creation myth to the hero and finally to the transformation myth. The first panel ended with the presentation by LARS DEILE (Bielefeld), who investigated the question of how carnival costumes had changed over time. The carnival costume shows the historicity regime of presenteeism (according to François Hartog), according to which the present would become the only horizon if the future had nothing more to teach. While in the early 19th-century historical costumes and carriages were still influential, in the 1970s the future played a stronger role in the form of astronaut costumes. However, nowadays it can be observed that in carnival costumes there are hardly any references to the past or the future, as Deile showed based on Amazon bestseller lists. Instead, modern heroes such as agents, policemen and firefighters representing security would be more popular. At the beginning of the second panel, ROBERT HUMMER (Salzburg) and SEBASTIAN BARSCH (Kiel) presented their studies which examined the use of toys and the historical awareness of girls of kindergarten age as well as the connection between Playmobil princesses and children's medieval ideas. Both studies are based on active engagement with the children's image of princesses (as drawing or construction). Using case studies, Hummer showed that traditional princess attributes (castles, knights, horses) as well as fairies, elves and unicorns were used during the game, while at the same time classic role distributions were broken up. BARSCH made it clear that the children attributed authenticity to the figures they had created themselves. However, the historical-cultural dimension of one's own ideas (e.g. today - earlier, poor - rich) was conscious. Traditionally female connotations such as "beauty" or "service" have been associated with the "unfree" past for women. The participants in the discussion stressed that the Disney film Frozen helped to break down princess stereotypes. In his contribution, WOLFGANG BUCHBERGER (Salzburg) focused on pirate pictures in the toys of Lego® and Playmobil®. He noted that although pirate-related toys were becoming more and more detailed, the essential features remained the same, e.g. pirate ship, weapons, treasure chest or eye patch. The desire for the extraordinary and (temporal) experiences of alterity make playing with pirates attractive. Popular historical

ideas would also influence the game. ARTEMIS YAGOU (Munich) focused on the construction and the construction materials of different models of a mini-Parthenon: Different materials would require different competences (patience, concentration, skill). The actual construction of many individual parts also offers the opportunity of satisfying or developing historical interest. She also pointed out that the boundaries between historical artefacts, toys and collectables would become blurred during construction. GEORG BERGTHALER (Vienna) presented his research on Indian figures from the toy museum. He made it clear that the design of the figures is based on a Euro-American perspective drawing above all on stereotypes: conflict and armed violence were associated with Indians; the cultural plurality of the Indians (e.g. the distinction between Woodland and Prairie/Plains Indians) was not reflected in the depiction. Bergthaler explained that although playing with Indian figures sparked interest in indigenous North American cultures, it was also of little educational value. CHRISTOPH KÜHBERGER (Salzburg) showed that Indian-themed play was already fashionable in Central Europe at the end of the 19th century; private photographs show the typically associated objects: feather crowns, arrows and bows, leather fringes. Even during National Socialism children disguised themselves as Indians, especially in connection with war ideals. In the 1960s, accelerated by more than 600 western films, the popularity of Indian-themed play peaked. The integration of the costume and the game into nature is particularly striking; fights, imprisonment and the "Indian" everyday life were played. Kühberger, however, also criticised in the context of post-colonial structure theories that the hierarchical differences between natives and immigrants, are still handed down today and updated in the game. OLIVER MILLER (Hannover) presented the Playmobil®-related radio play "Professor Mobilux" as a mediator of historical epochs. Professor Mobilux can travel through time, taking listeners into different worlds that are historical or fantastic. The radio play offers audio access, requires calm and concentration, motivates through integration into a story and has the opportunity of repetition, for example for one's own playing beyond the historical experience. The reciprocal influence of playing and thus of the ideas produced by it through various (historical-cultural) media was made clear. This aspect was also emphasised by other speakers.

OLIVER AUGE (Kiel), who opened the third panel, discussed toy knight's castles from the perspective of medieval studies. He noted that toy companies such as Lego® and Playmobil® would adapt their toys primarily to their customers, i.e. children, so that the producer side would always have to be considered: One wants to arouse interest, create as much play value as possible and spark the children's imagination. Auge explained that most of the toy knight's castles in the children's rooms were largely not authentic: Military aspects were predominant. The castles were built according to the Romantic style - the "ideal buildings" of the 19th century were the inspiration. Classical medieval castles - such as the Turmhügelburg in northern Germany – were not depicted. CHRISTOPH BRAMANN (Bochum) and STEPHAN EBERT (Darmstadt) juxtaposed historical sources and Playmobil® knight figures. The Playmobil® Knight has historical references that can be critically verified, e.g. his armour and weaponry consisting of lance, sword, battle axe and shield. At the same time,

however, areas of knightly life such as everyday life and courtly culture as well as religion and faith would be omitted. KARSTEN JAHNKE (Dresden) introduced the LARP (Live Action Role Playing) character Gero von Greifenstein and his play world. Knight Gero is the alter ego of Theo, a young man in his early 30s. In this case, the knight and war game is determined by the performative approach, which enables Theo to pose and become creative, as well as to promote the knight game with his alter ego. JÜRGEN ERHARD (Augsburg) showed the continuity and change of Lego® and Playmobil® play worlds from the 1970s to the present. While at the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s almost all novelties were still history-related, from 2000 onwards both manufacturers developed a large number of new game worlds, albeit with a small proportion of historical references (if, then medieval, pirate or western) and an increase in fantasy elements. Female protagonists hardly played and play a leading role. On the other hand, changes would be found in the design of the figures, vehicles and buildings.

The last panel was dedicated to board and computer games. CHARLOTTE BÜHL-GRAMER (Nürnberg-Erlangen) discussed board games as a sub-segment of popular representations of history and as a phenomenon of historical culture by analysing various "games of the year". In board games, history does not have to be constructed by the player, but is already predetermined in different ways: The spectrum ranges from games with history as a pure backdrop ("Valley of the Vikings") to games with history as an epoch-typical field of action ("Stone Age Junior", "Village"), in which economic aspects of the past scenario play a role, to history board games as a "Serious Game" ("Watergate"), in which history plays a greater role as a political conflict and as a model. Following on from this, WIEBKE WABURG, VOLKER MEHRINGER and BARBARA STERZENBACH (all Koblenz-Landau) presented an analysis of 100 game instructions for parlour games, which covered whether a historical framing in the form of explicit (dates and periods) or implicit references (fictitious and realistic elements) could be found in the instructions for the games examined. Of the 30 instructions with explicit references, two could be ascribed to prehistoric times, seven to classical antiquity, six to the Middle Ages and 15 to modern times. References to historical persons, living conditions, events and buildings could also be found. The speakers summarised that the playing instructions ranged from those with a great wealth of historical detail to those with superficial instructions. The lecture by ANDREAS KÖRBER (Hamburg) on computer games in history lessons completed the gamut of games. Using "Assassin's Creed Unity" and "Battlefield 1", he demonstrated how computer games with historical scenarios can be used to promote multi-perspectivity and reveal possibilities for action. Körber stressed that although games are not a means of recording the past, they can be an opportunity for historical learning, reflection and analysis. Games should be understood as "simulation spaces for history" and their implicit narratives de-constructed.

The conference made an important contribution to the research of the relationship between history and games, toys, and play, which became clear in the manifold content-related and methodological approaches of the lecturers, which can however only be the starting point for further research and the planned exhibition. All the lectures and

discussions showed that it is the fun and intrinsic motivation that makes playing so special: toys with historical references must take advantage of these aspects. This applies not only to children but also to adults, a group amongst which toys and collecting are becoming increasingly popular. In the discussions, it was pointed out that the toy invites to pursue creative impulses, but also to adhere to the given regimes and goals (construction and play). Also, historically charged toys would later help with formal learning. The inclusion of Indian toys from the former GDR, which, according to the participants, would have had a more positive, inclusive and feminine approach to toys, was not included enough. The quality of the toys was criticised by everyone: too often were historically incorrect or simplified images conveyed. At the same time, however, there was an awareness that empirical validity analyses are only one aspect that all too often displaces the performative and the obstinacy of the game in the analysis of toys.