

too much and too many: how commercialism and screen technology combine to rob children of creative play

by Susan Linn

At the age of six, and because of television, I became enamored of Flash Gordon, a precursor to Spiderman and the whole raft of today's superheroes. My mother had already taken me to see Walt Disney's *Peter Pan* at a local movie theater, which I adored; and I became equally mesmerized by the musical version that was broadcast annually on NBC in the next few years. Flash Gordon and Peter Pan figured heavily into hours and hours of my pretend play. In my world they were great friends, joining forces with each other, and me, to fight the twin evils of Ming the Merciless and Captain Hook.

Play is so fundamental to children's health and well-being — and so endangered — that the United Nations lists it as a guaranteed right in its Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). For children in the third world, societal horrors such as exploitation through slavery, child conscription, and child labor, deny children their right to play. In the United States and other industrialized nations, seduction, not conscription, lures children away from creative play. There are too many screens and too much marketing in the lives of too many children — and it's not good for them.

There's no credible evidence that screen time is in any way beneficial for babies. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under the age of two. It is possible, however, for thoughtfully monitored screen viewing to have benefits for older children. And while screen media is not as conducive to encouraging creativity as books or radio, for instance, research does suggest that screens can be a springboard for creative play (see for example, Singer & Singer, 1990). What is a disaster for children's creative play is the unprecedented and unfortunate 21st century convergence of increasingly miniaturized, sophisticated screen technology with unfettered, unregulated commercials. Loveable media characters; cutting-edge technology; brightly colored

packaging; and well-funded, psychologically-savvy marketing strategies combine in coordinated campaigns to capture the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children — teaching them to value that which can be bought over their own make-believe creations.

I sometimes feel a bit hypocritical for cherishing my childhood affection for Flash Gordon and Peter Pan. I am, after all, the director of a national advocacy coalition working to reclaim childhood from corporate marketers. A major portion of my work is focused on the commercialization of children's lives and the need to limit children's access to screens, in large part because of their negative impact on creative play. My experience of beloved screen characters, however, was significantly different from the experience of children today. When I was a child, Flash Gordon movies were serialized on television, but only occasionally. I saw Disney's *Peter Pan* only once on a trip to the movies with my mother. The TV adaptation of the Broadway play was broadcast annually for a few years. Children of previous generations, myself included, did not have unlimited access to the media programs we loved. Instead, we had unlimited access to our own imperfect memories of the stories and characters we saw on the screen. The only way I could satisfy my desire to immerse myself in the world created by screen versions of *Peter Pan* was to construct it myself. In a sense, I had to play; and in the process, I could make Neverland my own.

Too much access

Unlike my experience of seeing Disney's *Peter Pan* once when I was six, and not again until I was 19, children growing up today can watch their favorite movies and TV programs repeatedly on cell phones, mp3 players, tiny DVD players, computers, in the back-seat of their family car, and even in shopping carts. Such unlimited access to miniaturized screens means

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that even when children are out and about, we are depriving them of opportunities to engage in the world and encouraging them to turn to screens instead. At dinner in a favorite diner a while ago I watched two families — each consisting of two parents and a toddler — cope very differently with the challenges of eating out with children ensconced in that stage of development where their delight in active exploration supersedes their delight in anything else, including eating.

One family came equipped with a bright red portable DVD player. Their son was immersed in Thomas the Tank Engine®, a highly-regarded television program for preschoolers, throughout their meal. He was completely silent and oblivious to his surroundings, absentmindedly chewing on the morsels of food his mom fed him from her fork. His parents were able to enjoy their meal uninterrupted. They were even able to carry on an extended conversation, an admittedly rare experience for parents of very young children.

The other parents had a less peaceful meal. After their toddler reached the limit of his tolerance for being confined in a high chair, rather than distracting him from the urge to explore the sights and sounds of the restaurant, his parents took turns walking him around. Clutching a plastic spoon, he spent several minutes with his nose pressed against a case of fancifully decorated pastries. He made shovelling gestures with

his spoon and held it up to his mom. “Are you giving me a taste?” she asked. “Yum!” Laughing, he did it again. “Up” he said, pointing to the top row of cakes. “That’s right,” his mom said. “The pink cakes are up.” “Down!” he chortled, bending his knees a little as he pointed to the bottom row. Holding his mom’s hand, he trotted back to their table where he was handed over to his dad, ending up back at the pastry case while his mom finished her dinner. With his parents’ help, his inborn capacity for playful exploration transformed the restaurant into a laboratory for exploring color, spatial concepts, and make-believe.

What about the little boy engrossed in his own portable DVD player? What are the primary life lessons children absorb by regularly watching DVDs while eating in a restaurant? They learn:

- to look to screens rather than to their environment for stimulation
- to expect to be entertained rather than entertaining themselves
- that interacting with family during meals is so boring that they need the inducement of screen entertainment to get through dinner, and
- they learn that eating is something to do while you’re doing something else.



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And, more importantly, they:

- miss experiencing the feeling those unsettling niggles of curiosity that lead to the delights of active exploration
- miss the exhilarating sense of mastery and pride that comes with discovery and problem solving
- lose out on chances to nurture and preserve their innate sense of wonder
- miss opportunities to practice delaying gratification, which is essential for any task that involves setting a goal and working toward it — from succeeding at work to saving for retirement
- miss opportunities to generate play in and with their surroundings in their own unique ways.

They don't learn to discover what's unique about them in the world — what piques their interest and potential passions.

Too many viewings

In addition to depriving them of time spent in creative play, unlimited access to screens means that children get to see the same programs repeatedly. They can become so locked into set characters and scripts that their play becomes quite constricted.

I was playing with four-year-old Abigail in the dress-up corner of her preschool, when she suggested that we 'play princess.' "Okay," I replied. Then she asked, "Which princess are you?" I was puzzled. Her question implied a set of particular princesses and was a less open-ended query than, "What's your name?" I glommed on to the first name that popped into my head. "Umm . . . I'm Princess Anna." In a tone of amused exasperation, she responded instantly and authoritatively. "That's not a princess." "Really?" I asked, bewildered. She reeled off a list including Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*; Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*; Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*; and the eponymous Cinderella — the main properties in the Walt Disney Company's stable of princess characters culled from animated movies based primarily on fairy tales. While children a generation ago may have seen these four movies once or twice, children today can, and do, see them repeatedly.

A few days later when we were again 'playing princess' Abigail assigned me the task of scrubbing the floor. Looking up from my hands and knees I said brightly, "I must be Cinderella." "No!" she responded authoritatively, "You're Anastasia." I remembered that in the Disney version of *Cinderella* Anastasia is the tall skinny stepsister. "Anastasia never scrubbed a floor in her life!" I retorted rather scornfully. "She does in *Cinderella III*," Abigail replied sweetly. I stopped scrubbing. "There's a *Cinderella III*?" I asked in amazement. "Of course," she said, "after Cinderella is married."

For media companies, the financial benefit to keeping children glued to screens is in marketing — not just commercials, but in inculcating a devotion to media characters which, in turn, are licensed as toys and other products. Because the goal is to popularize a character so that it sells products, companies like Disney have taken to making sequels of their original programs. In addition to *Cinderella I, II, and III* on DVD, there's also *Disney Princess Stories* and *Disney Princess Sing Along Songs, Volumes 1, 2, and 3*; *Disney Game World: The Disney Princess Edition*; *Disney Princess Party, Volumes 1 and 2*; *Little Mermaid I and II*; *Aladdin I, II, and III*; *Beauty and the Beast, Beauty and the Beast: Belle's Magical World*, and *Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas*.

Too much brand licensing

Brand-licensed toys brought in \$22.8 billion in 2006. It's a huge business and it's easy to understand the appeal to children of a toy that represents a beloved media character. It's like owning your own personal piece of the magic that a film can evoke. In fact, another one of my vivid Peter Pan memories is spending hours painstakingly putting together a cardboard Captain Hook's pirate ship a few months after the movie came out. I was thrilled to be reminded of the characters and the story. I also remember playing with a Peter Pan sticker set — but those two toys were the only Disney Peter Pan toys I had and there weren't many on the market. It's a significant difference from the 40,000 Disney princess items on the market in 2006. I found 235 items on the ToysRUs® web site alone, including *Disney Princess Monopoly*, *A Disney Princess Magical Talking Kitchen* with 11 phrases and 18 accessories, *Leapster Educational Disney Princess Enchanted Learning Set*, and *Disney Princess Uno*. And of course, Disney isn't the only media company producing media-linked toys — today's toys feature



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Spiderman®, The Incredible Hulk®, Hannah Montana®, the Bratz®, and myriad other media properties. Equally troubling is the fact that many of the best-selling toys, in addition to featuring media characters — are embedded with computer chips that enable them to sing, dance, chirp, beep, and do back flips with just a push of a button. These toys advertise well because they look so exciting in 15-second commercials; but in fact they deprive children of the time, space, and silence essential for creative play.

The role of child care providers

Child care providers can play a critical role in ensuring children are provided with the time, space, and tools for make-believe. What we can no longer do is take play for granted:

- Make sure that your centers are commercial-free. Eliminate toys and books linked to media characters, and toys powered by batteries that chirp, beep, talk, sing, or do back flips on their own. When selecting toys for your program, remember that the best toys are 90% child and only 10% toy.
- Talk with parents about the importance of creative play for learning. Stock your library with books and articles for parents about the importance of play and how to nurture it.

- Encourage parents to limit screen time and media-linked toys at home.
- Engage in creative play with children. For children deprived of play at home, we can be models for playing creatively — they can catch on really quickly when given the opportunity.

Conclusion

Hands-on creative play is essential to children's health and well being, yet in the 21st century United States, nurturing such play has actually become countercultural. The dominant, marketing-driven, media-saturated culture dictates against it. We can no longer assume that children even know how to play creatively. The greatest gift we can give to them and their families is to create schools, centers, and spaces for children that provide alternatives to commercial culture — places where creative play is nurtured, rather than stifled, where we provide children opportunities to explore themselves and the world, and give them a chance to learn to value their own creations above the things that corporations sell.

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