

Chapter 29

Just toys? From material sustainability to co-design and degrowth

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A month before a friend had a baby, she told me if I planned to send a gift, they only wanted books. What a relief: to be told what would be appreciated and used. To not have to walk the blue and pink segregated aisles of a Toys 'R' Us and wonder how the parents would respond to being gifted a doll for their son or a tractor for their daughter. I've found picking out appropriate toys for my five young nephews to be a sustainability minefield. I don't want to encourage violence with Transformers covered in rockets, but what if they think it's boring because it's not their favourite character and it just gets thrown away?

These anxieties are an occupational hazard. I'm a sustainability scholar in a design research centre, and it's hard to put down the critic's hat when it comes to the climate emergency. Yet if you go by what's in the news, I apparently worry about this more than most people. In contrast to increasing headlines about climate change, plastic pollution and fast fashion, toys are fairly absent from any public debate around sustainability. Yet toys are important facilitators of education and societal values, and their roles have long been discussed in relation to career choices and perceived gender norms. Less often, though, is it acknowledged how toys carry implicit messages about environmental sustainability or social justice. Like how it wasn't until 2019 that Barbie included someone in a wheelchair, six different body types, and nine skin tones. What does that (un)intentionally teach children about acceptable ways of being in society?

One of the few examples of toy sustainability reaching UK headlines was also in 2019, thanks to seven- and nine-year-old Ella and Catlin, who complained to their parents about the waste from free toys from fast food chains and successfully lobbied them so that several newspapers ran with the headline "Burger King ditches free toys." I'm all for reducing the amount of unwanted, fast toys (ones designed for 5 minutes of play life), but it feels like another example of how sustainability is too narrowly defined. Too often, the responsibility to create change is placed on children. Too often, environmental sustainability is understood only as an issue of materiality and pollution.

Toys appear to follow these problematic framings. For example, in 2020, Lego announced a \$400 million investment to drive a low-carbon transition. Their focus: alternative materials. Certainly, 90% of the global toy market is made from virgin plastics, and plastic production is intimately linked to fossil fuel refineries, and thus it's a contributor and political interest that stands in the way of

decarbonisation plans. But using “more sustainable materials” is actually a technological-fix; it is not about reducing production or consumption overall.

In contrast, the recognition of the importance of degrowth or ‘sufficiency policies’ has recently been acknowledged by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their latest report on Mitigation. Here, the IPCC defines sufficiency policies as “a set of measures and daily practices that avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human well-being for all within planetary boundaries” (2022, p. 31), and the report suggests that on a global scale, this sort of degrowth intervention will provide similar carbon reductions (10%) as investment in renewable energy generation (9%).

Here, the mention of human well-being and flourishing is significant because it signals a move away from using only economic measures of progress. Indeed, this IPCC report included “Literature on degrowth, post growth, and post development [that] questions the sustainability and imperative of more growth especially in already industrialised countries and argues that prosperity and the ‘Good Life’ are not immutably tied to economic growth” (p. 178). This is because “Vital dimensions of well-being correlate with consumption, but only up to a threshold” (p. 514), and this is what growth-critical scholars call the saturation hypothesis, which implies that reducing income per capita in rich countries (one of the implications of degrowth) will not reduce quality of life if income levels do not fall below a certain level.

Economist Tim Jackson, renowned author of *Prosperity without Growth*, explains this as the double dividend: “If the consumer way of life is both ecologically damaging and psychologically flawed, then the possibility remains that we could live better by consuming less and reduce our impact on the environment at the same time” (Jackson, 2005, p. 11).

Relating this back to the subject of toys, children in high-income households arguably consume more toys than ‘needed’ for their well-being. If you need something to play with and you suddenly get access to a toy, you’re happy. If you get a second toy, you’ll perhaps still be happy but not as much as the first time. If you get 20 toys, you won’t bother using some because you already have two. If you get a hundred more toys, you may actually be annoyed because you won’t know where to put them all. At a certain threshold, the well-being you derive from them will saturate. This common sense we can see in our everyday lives is true for a country as a whole. Past a certain threshold of gross domestic product per capita, further economic growth will not improve well-being. This idea of a satiation threshold divides consumption in two kinds: one below the threshold that should be increased and one above it that we can afford to decrease.

My nephews’ homes are certainly saturated with toys, some well loved and others hardly touched before my siblings pilfer them away to donate to local charity shops. While it’s common to suggest people could better manage the toys or items they purchase so things aren’t wasteful, I prefer to look for collective solutions that go beyond putting responsibility for climate action on individuals. With this in mind, one potential degrowth response to the concerns of material (over) consumption of toys is an old idea: libraries.

When I think about libraries, it always reminds me of a scene from *Matilda*. When Matilda reaches the age of four, she discovers the local library and starts pulling wagon-loads of books the ten blocks home after the librarian has told her, “You know you can have your very own library card and you could take books home. . . . You could take as many as you like”. In a voice filled with quiet, lispng awe, she responds “That would be wonderful” (Davito, 1996).

I can imagine the same wonder and appreciation children and families could and do gain from being members of a public toy library. Access to libraries can teach us about collective action and civic pride, and they can be an economic leveller ensuring that basic needs and well-being are accessible to everyone. But it’s also a good formative time to introduce the idea of temporary possession and things not having to be new to be desirable. This sort of solution is admittedly more complicated than each toy manufacturer—like Lego’s \$400 million investment— or company that sells or gives away toys—like Burger King and other fast-food chains—making their own business model more sustainable because it requires many stakeholders to work together for the public good. And this is where designers and design research can play a key role.

Designers excel at bridging ontologies, bringing together different stakeholders, creating community and translating ideas into action with policymakers and local government. Co-design is a method for creatively engaging citizens and stakeholders to find solutions to complex problems, and it means thinking beyond simple material substitution to collaborative problem-framing and -solving. What design research has to offer these sorts of degrowth interventions is this form of holistic intervention, looking beyond the design of the toy and its materiality to wider systems in which toys are acquired, used, and disposed of.

The next time someone applauds themselves for finding a sustainable toy because it’s made from wood (I am completely guilty of this), see if you can gently expand the conversation beyond environmentally friendly materials to how we reimagine toys as a service rather than a commodity. Or the messages they carry about (over)consumption and needing more and more to be satisfied. Finding out what sort of toys or children’s gifts will be valued by your friends of family members is an obvious start to avoiding them going quickly to landfill or a charity shop. But even more than that, toy sustainability means opening up conversations with toy manufacturers, designers, parents, teachers, children, local government, and academics to reimagine the values and skills 21st-century toys should embody.

Reference list

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