

Maaïke Lauwaert

### Get up and play! Historicizing computer games in the context of learning, consumerism, and health issues

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Maaïke Lauwaert

## Get up and play!

Historicizing computer games in the context of learning, consumerism, and health issues

### Visible and invisible play

On a sunny day we are sitting on a bench at the edge of a playground, eating a sandwich. In front of us a group of ten Asian children, boys and girls, aged between two and sixteen, are playing with a ball. With nothing to do but watch them play, something funny and beautiful becomes apparent. In one way or another all those who cross the playground become involved in their game. When the ball bounces away and off the playground, a friendly old man catches it and spontaneously throws it back to the kids. A ball that accidentally hits a young passer-by causes him to smile, rather than angering him, and by kicking the ball back to the kids he momentarily joins their game. And when inevitably the ball gets stuck beneath our bench, we also embrace this opportunity to get involved in the game. Eagerly we retrieve the ball only to return it to the playing children reluctantly. This much is clear: the ball game works as a unifying force and engages individuals who otherwise would have no reason to interact with each other.

In many ways this innocent type of play – outdoors, involving physical and social activity – seems more attractive than that associated with the modern-day computer game, which hardly requires physical activity and is normally done alone and indoors. But are computer games really so anti-social? It is not so hard to prove the opposite. Like a ball game, a computer game can bring together different people and result in new social bonds. Still it is true that this type of game is always played indoors and that its players, while sitting hunched over a controller or keyboard, exclusively rely on their hands and eyes, while some may become so engrossed in their game that unknowingly they inflict injuries upon themselves.

The larger issue involved here, it seems, is how we perceive and value toys and games, how this perception and valuation relates to opportunities for players' participation and socialization, and also how we view children and assess the significance of play in their growing up. We tend to favour or value outdoor (ball) games because of their accessibility and comparatively high level of parti-

icipation. Many of these games take place in the public domain, and given their established nature they have a high degree of social visibility and – to most – comprehensibility. Computer games, by contrast, are played indoors and therefore the various social engagements and forms of participation are not readily visible to those who are not playing. Moreover, computer games are still a fairly new cultural phenomenon, mediated by new and frequently cutting-edge technologies, and as such many (older) people do not have a handle on these games yet. For example, parents who watch their child play a computer game may find it hard to understand exactly what is going on, let alone appreciate the game's specific merits or challenges. When looking over their child's shoulder they merely see a colourful screen that often depicts violent scenes that may or may not be accompanied by loud sound effects. Moreover, most of these parents will be unaware of the wider social and cultural structures underpinning these games: the chat rooms, the fan sites, the magazines, the trading cards, the action figures, the fighting teams, the schoolyard talk, and so on.

In the ongoing debate about the effects of playing computer games it is possible to identify three major concerns. First, there is the learning issue. Computer game foes emphasize that children and teenagers in fact learn the *wrong* things from playing such games, mainly because of the violent nature of many computer games. Proponents of computer games counter this argument by underlining the positive things one learns by playing them, such as hand-eye coordination, social interaction, and computer skills. Second, there is the issue of consumerism. Ever since the rise of our consumer culture people have worried about its corrupting effects on children in particular. They argue that consumerism is fuelled by envy, jealousy, and greed, and that these aspects hardly contribute to making better or nicer persons. Computer games are often considered the epitome of consumerism. They are promoted aggressively through ads, commercials, movies, card and board games, action figures, animated movies, and so on. Their publicity campaigns would turn children into slavish consumers who only crave for the ENTER THE MATRIX game (2003, Atari) after having seen the movie THE MATRIX RELOADED (USA 2003, A. Wachowski & L. Wachowski.) or the ad on the box of their favourite brand of cereal. Consequently, children fall victim to the callous and greedy entertainment industry that at the expense of their vulnerabilities is merely interested in raising its own profits. Or so the argument goes. Third, there is the physical health concern. Children play computer games indoors, hunched over a keyboard or controller, and with their eyes glued to the screen. They overuse certain muscles while totally neglecting others. Instead of being out in the open and getting physical exercise, they spend the entire day indoors, breathing stale air. Furthermore, computer games are seen as *un-put-down-able* and while playing, children forget to eat, take a break, go to the bathroom, or stretch their legs; they just play on and on. These games come with risk

of *over-playing*, which may cause various physical problems, such as epilepsy, blood clots,<sup>1</sup> and RSI (repetitive strain injury).

Each of these three concerns, as I will argue in this paper, has historical roots and their consideration puts the particular arguments involved into perspective. By historicizing the worries triggered by the recent popularity of computer games it becomes possible to move beyond either simple rejection or uncritical endorsement of this new and well-liked form of play. Specifically this will entail a consideration of the history of games and play and of how our culture conceives of children and their growing up. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the education of children became an important focus in Western societies, as is true of the role of toys and play. In the wake of new educational philosophies, children gradually began to inhabit a world of their own, with their own toys, books, spaces, clothing, food, soap, doctors and so on. The lives of children were increasingly influenced by industrialization, commercialization and urbanization. Apart from bringing higher standards of living, these processes had several worrisome side-effects, notably for children and their opportunities for play as a vital dimension of their growing up.

To demonstrate how the general processes of industrialization, urbanization, and commercialisation influenced notions about childhood and play and how they shaped ideas regarding children's learning, consumerism, and physical health, I will focus on three key moments in the history of toys, games, and play: the introduction of kindergarten, the rise of the department store, and the invention of the playground. These case studies serve to elucidate how some of the arguments that shape and dominate the debate on computer games – playing is learning, consumerism is corrupting, a healthy mind needs a healthy body — were originally articulated and put into practice.

## Kindergarten: toys, games, and play as learning tools

One of the main reasons why computer games are subject to controversy is the fact that people have qualms about their effects on how children and teenagers mature into responsible adults. This idea stems from the more deeply seated notion that games are socializing activities that help young individuals to learn and comprehend the rules and ethics of the society they live in. As Janet Murray has argued, games are traditionally regarded as «rehearsals for life».<sup>2</sup> Because we think of games as model structures, concerns have been raised about the exam-

1 «Dominic Patrick, 14, from Merseyside, developed deep vein thrombosis after a rainy day inside with a games console», BBC News: «Computer game teenager gets DVT». URL: , 2004.

2 Janet Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. New York 1997, p. 144.

ples set by computer games that are seen as violent, sexist, or simplistic. The belief that children learn through playing is firmly rooted in our attitude towards toys and games.

This learning-through-playing doctrine – which is closely intertwined with various political, social, economical, and religious changes that took place over the last two hundred years – has had tremendous effects on the lives of children in Western societies. Two key figures in the changing conceptualization of children and the relevance of their education are John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Locke was among the first to argue that children should be educated and separated from the adult working world in order to be raised properly. His empiricist philosophy stressed that at birth every human being is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate onto which knowledge is imprinted through experience. Accordingly, he underscored the importance of schooling and education. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) we read:

[O]f all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. [...] If [...] the difference to be found in the manners and abilities of men is owing more to their *education* than to anything else, we have reason to conclude that great care is to be had of the forming of children's *minds*.<sup>3</sup>

After Locke's ideas gradually found their way into governmental and legislative decision-making, children became increasingly separated from adults and the working world. But not until 1833 was the law against child labour first formulated in the UK, followed in 1881 by the law on school attendance and in 1889 by the cruelty acts, which for the first time, as Stephen Kline put it with a touch of irony, «extended to children the same protection from abuse granted to animals.»<sup>4</sup> Like Locke, Rousseau stressed that infancy is a crucial period in a child's life. In *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762) Rousseau unswervingly writes:

We are born weak, we need strength; we are born totally unprovided, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgment. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education. This education comes to us from nature or from men or from things. [...] We begin to instruct ourselves when we begin to live. Our education begins with us.<sup>5</sup>

These views of Locke and Rousseau on education, as well as those of other Enlightenment thinkers on humanity in general, had a tremendous impact on the

3 John Locke: *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Indianapolis 1996, p. 10, 25.

4 Stephen Kline: *Out of the Garden: toys, TV and children's culture in the age of marketing*. London 1993, p. 47.

5 Jean-Jacques: *Émile ou de l'éducation*. London 1991, p. 38, 42.

learning-through-playing doctrine. It was in the context of its implementation in the nineteenth century that the prevailing educational attitude radically changed, as reflected in the shift from efforts to dominate children's will to efforts aimed at «protecting children and guiding them in the proper paths.»<sup>6</sup> It was during this same period that the view of children as innocent beings «in need of formation and learning, to be protected from the harsher realities of industrial society» became established.<sup>7</sup> Learning and education began to be conceived as crucial for children, whereby toys, games, and play increasingly came to be viewed as suitable means. In this respect, the American psychologist and educationalist Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Future of Play Theory*, argues that in the twentieth century there has been an «obsession» among life-science scholars

with demonstrating that children learn something useful from their play, a latter-day outcome, apparently, of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment view of humanity as susceptible to scientific study and therefore as capable of progress.<sup>8</sup>

During the Enlightenment, then, the foundation was put in place for the idea of children as malleable subjects that are in need of the *right*, character-building toys and games. These eighteenth-century ideas and concerns about education and the role of toys began to be put into practice by nineteenth-century educational movements. They grounded the various social and educational purposes of toys mainly in Locke's theories.<sup>9</sup> Major representatives, such as Friedrich Fröbel (Germany, 1782–1852) and, later on, Rudolf Steiner (Germany, 1861–1925) and Maria Montessori (Italy, 1870–1952) argued the significance of learning through free and uninterrupted play. Moreover, many of these Romantic educationalists felt that modern cities, due to industrialization and urbanization, no longer provided sufficient spaces or healthy environments for children to play.

One of the most influential of these educational movements was the one initiated by the German pedagogue Fröbel, who developed the idea, system, and concept of «kindergarten» (literally: «children's garden»), the pre-school educational institution where children learn through playing. In 1837 Fröbel established the first kindergarten in Blankenburg, Germany. He formulated his kin-

6 Stephen Kline: *Out of the Garden*, p. 48.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

8 Brian Sutton-Smith: »Conclusion: the Persuasive Rhetorics of Play«. In: A. Pellegrini (Ed.): *The Future of Play Theory: a multidisciplinary inquiry into the contributions of Brian Sutton-Smith*. New York 1995, p. 279.

9 Lois Kuznets: *When Toys Come Alive: narratives of animation, metamorphosis, and development*. New Haven 1994, p. 3.

dergarten philosophy in his most famous publication *Die Menschenerziehung, die Erziehungs- Unterrichts- und Lehrkunst*,<sup>10</sup> translated as *The Education of Man*.<sup>11</sup> Kindergarten was a place especially designed for urban children, where they could play and grow in homely, cosy surroundings. Fröbel founded his kindergarten concept on the belief that children start learning from the moment they become conscious and that therefore their education must start at an early stage.<sup>12</sup> His kindergarten proved a highly successful formula: after his death it was transplanted to most European countries, their colonies, the United States, and even the Far East.<sup>13</sup>

Fröbel considered play «the highest phase of child-development» and stressed that it is «highly serious and of deep significance» rather than trivial.<sup>14</sup> He felt play to be a crucial dimension of the learning process. Fröbel wanted children to achieve unity – unity with God. His abstract, holistic, and, above all, religious worldview was to be communicated to children through his system of *Gaben* or «gifts» (from God) and *Beschäftigungen* or «occupations» (God-given as well). In this respect, Norman Brosterman has argued that the early kindergarten was a «radical and highly spiritual system of abstract-design activities intended to teach the recognition and appreciation of natural harmony.»<sup>15</sup> These gifts and occupations had to instil in children an understanding of the mathematically generated logic underlying the ebb and flow of creation.<sup>16</sup> Since playing was regarded such an important tool for learning, Fröbel designed the gifts/toys and the occupations/activities himself and he described in painstaking detail how the toys should be used, when they should be presented to children and how teachers had to introduce them.

In Fröbel's system, there is a total of twenty kindergarten gifts. Their sequence starts with simple ones, such as balls and blocks, and gradually evolves to more complex gifts and occupations, such as paper cutting, weaving, folding, and modelling clay. The first gift, a ball, symbolizes the «concept of divine, all-inclusive unity», while the second gift, consisting of a sphere, cube, and cylinder is supposed to «move the child toward the reconciliation of opposites.»<sup>17</sup> The next four gifts consist of wooden blocks. Children were taught to use them for building «life forms» (a house or a church), «forms of knowledge» (geome-

10 Friedrich Fröbel: *Die Menschenerziehung: die Erziehungs-, Unterrichts- und Lehrkunst*. Keilhau 1826.

11 Friedrich Fröbel: *The Education of Man*. New York 1887.

12 Norman Brosterman: *Inventing kindergarten*. New York 1997, p. 30.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

14 Friedrich Fröbel: *The Education of Man*, p. 54, 55.

15 Norman Brosterman: *Inventing kindergarten*, p. 12.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 12–13.

17 Evelyn Weber: »Play Materials in the Curriculum of Early Childhood«. In: K. Hewitt/L. Roomet (Eds.): *Educational Toys in America: 1800 to the Present*. Burlington 1979, p. 27.

tric shapes), and «forms of beauty» (designs for aesthetic appreciation).<sup>18</sup> In *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* (1897), Fröbel described how these gifts should be used. The fifth gift, for example, is accompanied by the following specific directions:

Before beginning his play with this gift the child must apprehend it as a symmetrical whole, complete in itself. [...] In conformity with this demand the bottom of the box must be occupied by one row of undivided cubes, one row of halved cubes, and one row of quartered cubes. The eighteen remaining undivided cubes fill the rest of the box. If the cubes be thus arranged in the box and covered with the lid, it is only necessary to place the box on the table with the cover downward, then to draw out the cover and raise the box with a steady hand. When the box is withdrawn the whole cube, with its parts well arranged, stands before the child.<sup>19</sup>

Fröbel goes on for a few more pages in this way, describing in utmost detail all the various benefits of this mode of presenting the gift to the child. Not surprisingly, it is precisely this rigidity that has met with criticism. His stringent system hardly leaves any room for children's creativity, improvisation, and inventiveness. Today, most kindergartens have changed one or more things in Fröbel's system, but the gifts he designed remain very popular and can still be bought in toy stores or on the Internet.<sup>20</sup>

Influenced by Enlightenment views on education and the role of toys and play therein, the notion of playing as learning gained ground. If formerly some toys or games were specifically designed to teach children certain things, today we look upon every toy and game as a tool for learning, even the ones that are not especially designed to do so. This in part explains the anxiety prompted by the emergence of computer games. The automatic assumption, after all, is that children ought to learn from these games. But what exactly do they learn from playing computer games? Do they merely gain experience in efficient destruction or do they learn more valuable things such as working with computers? Or both? Evidently, opinions vary on what children, or adults, learn through playing computer games. The assumed causality between playing violent computer games and committing violent acts in the real world, however, is still uncorroborated.

18 Ibid., p. 28.

19 Friedrich Fröbel: *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*. London 1897, p. 204–205.

20 For example: , <http://www.naturalplay.com/froebel/>.



## Department stores: the child as consumer

It is a fairly new phenomenon that parents can get lost in gigantic *Toys«R»Us* stores in search of their children's favourite toy of the season. That children have their own rooms to sleep and play in, that there is food, fashion, furniture, medication, therapy, education, and entertainment specifically designed for them is in fact a phenomenon of rather recent date. Since the Industrial Revolution the production and consumption of toys have changed significantly, but the same applies to the way in which society looks upon children and the function of toys in their lives. Ever since its emergence, the new <child



Abb. 1 John Everett Millais: *Bubbles*<sup>21</sup>

culture>, with children as major consumers, has been a source of concern to many a moralist, educationalist, and politician. Computer games are often couched in this particular context, as epitomizing modern consumerism. Children cannot but crave for them after having seen the movie, the animated movie, the billboards, the magazines, or the figures on the box of their favourite brand of cereal. The gaming industry's aggressive commercial strategies provide another reason for considering computer games immoral; they turn children into slavish consumers at an age when they should still be free from these pressures, so the reasoning goes.

This exposure to a world dominated by consumerism goes back to the nineteenth century. The work of various pedagogues and educational experts from that period led to a dramatic change in the image of and thinking about children and childhood. New notions about children's culture found their way into various nineteenth-century representations, such as the famous soap ad *Bubbles* painted by the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais in 1886. The child depicted is some sort of angel – a beautiful, innocent, vulnerable dreamer that needs to be taken care of, washed, dressed, fed, and cured. Plainly, the painting represents the sentiments of the time and it characterizes the new perspective on children, childhood, and child culture.

21 <http://www.artprints-on-demand.co.uk/noframes/millais/bubbles.htm>.

The title of Swedish pedagogue Ellen Key's educational treatise *The Age of the Child* has famously been applied to the nineteenth century at large.<sup>22</sup> At that time the life expectancy and quality of life went up, specialty stores for children – toys, clothing – mushroomed, and a literature written specifically for children emerged.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as Kline has argued, the «Victorian awakening to the preciousness of childhood helped ensure that children's goods would expand along with other markets»<sup>24</sup> and that it was «upon these formative foundations of the nineteenth century that toys, sporting and play equipment, uniforms, and other accoutrements have been added as a now common part of so many children's lives.»<sup>25</sup> These processes of commercialization and specialization have continued ever since, and today «children are celebrated in the market economies as Very Important Consumers.»<sup>26</sup> Evidently, the child as consumer is here to stay.

It was in the nineteenth century, this Age of the Child, that play came to be regarded as an important activity, as «the work of childhood» – the moral equivalent of labour.»<sup>27</sup> Play was understood as an important activity and this view, together with the new possibilities of mass production and distribution, gave rise to a whole new field of consumer goods targeted at children.<sup>28</sup> During this era, the nature of toys changed dramatically under the sway of various technological advances: the new clockwork technology, the steam engine technology, and a host of new industrialized manufacturing methods. This resulted in novelties such as riding trains and whistling boats, talking dolls and running horses. Fathers and sons were both fascinated by the steam engine and clockwork technology and were delighted with the fact that many technologies were also applied to toy formats. Moreover, toys were increasingly mass-produced and this made them affordable to larger segments of society.

Besides changes in technology and industry, the nineteenth century saw the rise of advertising and the department store. The new toys were advertised in magazines and displayed in the windows of the new and luxurious department stores. As a result, many industries that specifically targeted children began to flourish. Shopping transformed from a duty into something to enjoy. People went out to see the new goods instead of waiting until vendors would pass through their street or neighbourhood.<sup>29</sup> Broader sidewalks, beautiful shops and

22 Ellen Key: *The Century of the Child*. New York 1909.

23 A. R. Colòn/P. A. Colòn: *A History of Children. A Socio-Cultural Survey Across Millennia*. London 2001, p. 505.

24 Stephen Kline: *Out of the Garden*, p. 53.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

26 Barbara Hendricks: *Designing for Play*. Aldershot 2001, p 3.

27 Stephen Kline: *Out of the Garden*, p. 51.

28 The broader process of Americanization also influenced this process of children being targeted as consumers.

luxury novelties attracted individuals from different social ranks, both men and women.<sup>30</sup> Of course, buying new products had long been a privilege of the rich. Working class people rarely entered shops and money was not something most people used on a daily basis. Moreover, as Rosalind Williams has put it, «the activity of consumption was closely linked with that of production»,<sup>31</sup> and the purchase of goods had always been tied to necessity. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, commerce and industry actively began to create and manipulate new desires so that people began to buy commodities just for the sake of buying.

That the new shops were selling goods that middle and even lower class people could afford was at first condemned and criticized, because many feared the unsettling effects of this development on the status quo. Many a critic dismissed the new consumerism as *démocratisation du luxe* because the luxury goods could be looked at and even purchased by *tout le monde*.<sup>32</sup> The new policy of *entrée libre* allowed everyone to enter stores without the obligation to buy, which of course was a way to stimulate impulse buying.<sup>33</sup> But critics also disapproved of the fact that women (and, to a lesser extent, men) were seduced to buy more and more, that shopping was encouraged instead of rejected as a sinful activity. The introduction of the first annual store sales made some feel disgusted with shoppers and the hysterical ways in which shopping was promoted (shoppers who would even sleep on the doorstep of big shops to ensure early access). In time, however, consumerism became accepted as something that was not just inevitable but also positive; it fuelled the capitalist economy and enabled the poor to move upwards. In the shift from buying what one needed – in specialized shops – to buying what one *desired*, the department store was «the most visible symbol» of how things were changing.<sup>34</sup>

These changes also took place in the world of toys. Until the 1850s most children played with toys that were not so much purchased but made from leftover materials by craftsmen, parents or children themselves. If the selection of toys used to be limited to that which one could make by hand (a ball, a doll, a rattle, a sword), now the department stores had a dazzling choice of different toys avail-

29 Rachel Bowlby: *Just Looking. Consumer culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*. New York 1985, p. 1.

30 Jan Hein Furnée: »Winkeletalages als Moderne Massamedia. Visuele Cultuur en Sociale Verhoudingen in Den Haag, 1850–1890«. In: *De negentiende eeuw: documentatieblad Werkgroep 19e eeuw*. Arnhem 2003, Bd. 2, p. 82–90.

31 Rosalind Williams: *Dream Worlds: mass consumption in late nineteenth-century France*. Berkeley 1991, p. 2–3.

32 Rachel Bowlby: *Just Looking*, p. 1–2.

33 Anne Friedberg: *Window Shopping. Cinema and the Postmodern*. California 1993, p. 77.

34 Michael B. Miller: *The Bon Marché. Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869–1920*. Princeton 1981, p. 4.

lable. Children could (and often would) have a room full of different, new and technologically advanced toys: electric trains, talking dolls, and building sets. And since toys had become tools for learning, choosing the right ones was a delicate affair.

One of England's biggest and oldest department stores, Harrod's in London, started out as a small grocery store, but between 1835 and 1911 it evolved into the city's largest department store. It sold a wide variety of goods, from lobster to lion cubs, from perfume to Paddington bears. In December Harrod's held a Christmas Toy Fair that attracted thousands of children and their parents year after year.<sup>35</sup> In that same month the department stores decorated their windows in most alluring fashions. Toys from all over the world were imported and displayed alongside other curiosities and luxury goods.<sup>36</sup>

Another famous department store, Macy's in New York, started in 1858 as a dry goods store and grew within about two years into a full-fledged department store, starting with approximately twelve different departments. Business historian Ralph Hower singled out the annual display of dolls and toys in December 1860 as the point at which Macy's actually became a department store. From the very beginning, Macy's devoted a whole department to dolls and toys, which was one of its top five best-selling departments. In the ensuing years other departments that catered to children came into being, such as boys' clothing and kid gloves in 1877, children's muslin underwear and children's shoes, suits, and cloaks in 1887.<sup>37</sup> After World War Two, the nineteenth-century department store would be replaced by the twentieth-century shopping mall and from then onwards stores began to organize their different departments not on the basis of the kind of product sold (clothes, china, silverware, toys, etc.) but as floors or sections aimed at a certain group of consumers (women, men, or children). Almost every big store or mall we know today will have a whole floor or floor section dedicated to children's things, such as clothes, school materials, and toys. Children's products were, and still are, not only targeted at children but also at their parents (mostly mothers) because in many cases they are in charge of approving the purchases.

The dazzling success of department stores, together with the growing prosperity of the masses and the rise of the middle class, has contributed to turning

35 Tim Dale: *Harrods. The Store and the Legend*. London 1981, p 82–83.

36 New industrial means enabled toy manufacturers to transport their goods to different countries and continents, thereby replacing the local toy market with a more globalised one. Even though Fraser argues that certain types of toys have been universal since the ancient Egyptians, for the longest time these balls and dolls were hardly uniform because they were handmade. By contrast, the electric train (one of the most popular toys of the twentieth century) was mass-produced, shipped to many countries, and sold in department stores.

37 Ralph Merle Hower: *History of Macy's of New York 1858–1919. Chapters in the Evolution of the Department store*. Cambridge 1946, p. 106, 136, 162.

shopping and consumerism into an intrinsic dimension of Western societies. This implies among other things that children are subjected to aggressive sales strategies. In response, educational experts advise parents to buy the *right* toys for their children. As we have seen, not every toy qualifies for the important task of educating or socializing children. In the 1930s, Ethel Kawin, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, wrote a childrearing book called *The Wise Choice of Toys* in which she claims: «Play is an essential of childhood, and toys are the tools of play. [...] Parents should know the principles which serve as guides in the selection, use, and care of desirable play materials, so that they make a wise choice in selecting toys.»<sup>38</sup> Since the 1850s, educational toys have gained popularity. As such they combine educational and consumerist values.

## Playgrounds and urban children

If computer games are a contested genre of games, one of their main downsides is that they may negatively affect the player's health. Computer games are mostly played indoors, do not require bodily movement, and tend to absorb players to such degree that they start ignoring bodily signals that tell them it is time to stop. Naturally, this sharply conflicts with the assumption that children benefit most from playing out in the open, where they can freely move their bodies, strengthen their muscles, and suck in fresh air.

Between the 1850s and the 1920s, this concern for the health of urban children in particular grew into a major public health anxiety in Europe and America. The disappearance of safe locations for play, the lack of bodily movement and fresh air, and the absence of education and tutoring preoccupied many a philanthropist, parent, and reformist. Since the idea had taken root that children could and should be educated, people began to be concerned about their education. These educational worries became manifest not only at the level of mental or intellectual training but also at the level of physical growth. This concern for children's bodily health in urban environments was driven by the idea that only a healthy body houses a healthy soul. This ancient Roman and Greek notion was also promoted via the writings of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)<sup>39</sup> on the connection between bodily health and moral development.<sup>40</sup> The idea that a healthy body is something desirable, that it is indeed

38 Ethel Kawin: *The Wise Choice of Toys*. Chicago 1938, p. 1.

39 Between 1854 and 1859 Spencer published four influential essays on the importance of science in education. These essays were collected in 1859 as *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*. In the last of the four essays, *Physical Education*, the author dwells on the neglected issues of food, clothing, play, and sleep. See: Herbert Spencer: *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*. London 1993.

even necessary for accommodating a healthy soul, became a key concept in relation to children and childrearing during the nineteenth century. The biological and environmental assumptions of Darwinism brought about a whole new image of the child as subject to moral growth, rather than being morally predisposed (born sinful). This moral growth, however, was dependent on physical growth. Post-Darwinian theories of psychology, as Dominick Cavallo writes in *Muscles and Morals*, «presented the child as an organism whose physiological qualities were as important as his spiritual and psychological ones.»<sup>41</sup>

The main motivation for this interest and concern regarding children's physical health was the poor health condition of urban children and the high infant mortality rate. Health and living conditions were so bad that the average body size of someone living in a nineteenth-century industrial city was below that of an average medieval person.<sup>42</sup> The concern for urban children increased when it was discovered that boys growing up in the nineteenth-century industrial cities did not meet the basic physical tests for entering the military.<sup>43</sup> With a Europe on the verge of internal military confrontations, the «quality of the nation's heirs acquired a political significance.»<sup>44</sup> Since there was an urgent need for soldiers, the wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century did much to encourage the «child-rescuing» initiatives.

Industrialization and urbanization had spawned another set of problems: problems related to living spaces, hygiene, and lack of fresh air and exercise. Increasingly, children grew up in crowded and polluted cities that no longer were conducive to their needs. This applied in particular to lower class children who lacked supervision and had only the streets to turn to. The «child-rescuing» movements at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were «aimed at rescuing city children – especially working-class, ethnic children – from a cluster of social and economic hazards»,<sup>45</sup> such as economic exploitation, moral chaos and alienation, and the weakening of the sense of law and order. In addition, there were increasing efforts to monitor children's activities so as to keep them from misbehaving. Many initiatives addressed these issues: children were encouraged to engage in group activities (such as sports and boy scouts) and outdoor play (on playgrounds for example), doctors were stationed in schools or visited schools to check on the health and hygiene situation of children, and new

40 Petrus. J. H. Selten / Carlinde Adriaanse / Barbara Becker: *Af en toe met pa en moe: de speeltuinbeweging in Nederland 1900–1995*. Utrecht 1996, p. 22.

41 Dominick Cavallo: *Muscles and Morals. Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920*. Philadelphia 1981, p. 50.

42 Barbara Hendricks: *Designing for Play*, p 15.

43 Ibid., p 16.

44 Christina Hardyment: *Dream Babies. Child Care from Locke to Spock*. Oxford 1984, p. 99.

45 Dominick Cavallo: *Muscles and Morals*, p. 1.

laws were adopted aimed at regulating the physical and mental growth of children that grew up in industrial regions.

Although the opinions on almost any issue concerning the new urban life around 1800 diverged, nearly everyone agreed that children needed playgrounds: safe, outdoor places where they could play in groups under the supervision of teachers or parents. The public playground, then, was one of the major initiatives aimed at rescuing the child, and it served different purposes. Having safe places for children to play was thought to be important to them from a cognitive, social, and physical angle. If playing had become a learning and socialization tool, on a cognitive as well as physical level, playgrounds provided a solution for this need of «moral and muscular» development. But playgrounds also served as a means to ensure that children would not spend their leisure time in mischief. Apart from employment and pollution, industrialization also generated leisure. In the United States, for example, there was more time to play by the late 1800s. New workplace technologies shortened the workweek while new household technologies made domestic work easier.<sup>46</sup> This development was a source of concern to educationalists because of the dangers of idleness. To assuage the risks of leisure time, the playground movement organised many activities in parks, clubhouses, and playgrounds. This in turn gave rise to a host of new youth movements, such as the boy scouts and other forms of organized, location-based play.<sup>47</sup> At the start of the twentieth century, most playgrounds had a library and a clubhouse and they organized evening and weekend activities, sport events and contests. This was not aimed at children alone but also at youths and adults. Especially people from the lower social classes were thought to be in need of social education and organized group activities.

In the wake of Enlightenment philosophies and the new problems posed by industrialization and urbanization, children turned into beings who not only could and should be educated but who also were *in need* of social, mental, moral, and physical training and development. The playground provided a specific location for meeting these various needs. Children in playgrounds breathed fresh air, got physical exercise, engaged in social interaction, were safe from the dangers of traffic, and were kept away from the corrupting influences of the streets.

Today, we may still prefer children to engage in active group play outdoors, but most parents seem to lack the time to accompany their children to playgrounds and parks. In this respect, computer games can be viewed as a contemporary form of safe, indoors play. Yet in light of the prevailing healthy-soul-healthy-body notion, serious concerns have been raised in relation to computer

46 Andrew McClary: *Toys with nine lives: a social history of American toys*. North Haven 1997, p. 39.

47 Andrew McClary: *Toys with nine lives*, p. 40.



games. Ever since computer games became widely popular, specific health problems have been directly linked to playing these games, such as RSI, concentration lapse, involuntary urine discharge, blood clots, epilepsy, and even premature death.<sup>48</sup> These malfunctions are all attributed to the frequent playing of computer games – an issue that is increasingly on the mind of game designers as well. There is, at least, a growing number of computer games that can be played at home but require players to be physically active. A well-known example is the Eye Toy for PlayStation2, an off-the-couch game that is promoted for the whole family. Its slogan is, evocatively, «Get up and play». The Eye Toy consists of a small camera placed on top of the TV that is connected to PlayStation2. The player is thereby seen onscreen. In the mini-game called «Wishi Washi» one has to use hands, arms, and whatever one likes to wash away soap from windows. That physical activity is on the mind of game designers is apparent in particular in the dance game «Get down and Groove» for Eye Toy. Onscreen there is even a calorie counter that keeps track of how energetically the player is moving his or her body.

## **Conclusion**

This article's focus is on the ongoing debates that address the alleged negative effects of playing computer games. I singled out three concerns that are voiced frequently in particular: computer games corrupt children by teaching them the wrong things, these games epitomize the consumer culture that turns children into slavish consumers, and these games are unhealthy. By historicizing the conceptualization of games and play it becomes clear that even if these concerns have reoccurred in the last two centuries, their cultural contexts are constantly changing. A consideration of the introduction of kindergarten situates the concern for children's emotional development in relation to play; the case of the rise of the department store ties in the concern for toys with consumerism; study of the emergence of playgrounds in cities contextualizes concerns about the health of urban children and their need for physical activity. My argument underscores that the main concerns voiced against the popularity of computer games have specific historical roots.

It is equally relevant, however, to contextualize these games in relation to today's culture, if at least we are to grasp their appeal and negative or positive effects and characteristics more productively or in new ways. One alternative way

48 »A 24-year-old South Korean man died after playing computer games nonstop for 86 hours. The jobless man, identified by police only by his last name Kim, was found dead at an Internet cafe in Kwangju.» The Sydney Morning Herald: »Man dies after playing computer games non-stop». URL: , 2002.



of framing computer games is in the context of family life, or the relation between parents and children in today's society. Perhaps more than any other toy, computer games – as a form of play – are accompanied by ambivalence on the part of parents. They may dislike computer games for their perceived negative effects, much in the same way as some parents do not like to see their children watching TV all the time. But computer games also come in very handy because they take up little space and are the kind of toy that will keep children absorbed for hours while parents can go about their business. After all, most children do not need any assistance, for they understand these games better than their parents. Moreover, today's parents have grown more reluctant to let their children play outside and unsupervised. Computer games keep children safely indoors for hours. In this respect, Barbara Hendricks has suggested that «children in modern western cities are not so free – they are very restricted by traffic and fear of violence to children.»<sup>49</sup>

By exploring the historical roots of these and other concerns related to how we understand children, games, and play in the context of larger cultural processes, we may open up new directions for the ongoing debate on computer games – a debate that so far has mainly been characterized by a recycling of arguments, a going in circles.

49 Barbara Hendricks: *Designing for Play*, p 3–4.