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Babes in a Grown-up Toyland

By BENEDICT CAREY

WHATEVER happened to toys? Real toys, like dolls and model airplanes? A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that half of all 4- to 6-year-olds have played video games, a quarter of them regularly. Game makers are aggressively marketing to children as young as 3, while researchers report what parents already know: that children as young as 8 and 9 are asking for adult toys, like cellphones and iPods, rather than stuffed animals or toy trucks.

The trend has squeezed both makers and sellers of traditional toys, from the electric train company Lionel to retailers like Toys "R" Us and F. A. O. Schwarz. "I have seen 1-year-olds wanting to play with their parents' cellphones," said Irma Zandl of the Zandl Group, a youth-marketing research company. And they know the difference, she said, between a real and a fake one.

Which raises a question: As toys change, has play itself fundamentally changed? For that matter, does the early attachment to grown-up toys in some way shorten in the imaginative world of childhood, with its pretend tea parties and make-believe cops and robbers?

"The span in which children play with certain kinds of toys certainly has shrunk," said Dr. Gary Cross, a historian at Pennsylvania State University and author of "The Cute and the Cool," an analysis of children's consumer culture. "It used to be that 14-year-old girls could still play with dolls, and 14-year-old boys would still get Erector Sets as gifts."

Young children who have active imaginary lives tend to be adept reasoning about unknown situations and taking on another's perspective, studies suggest. "I think there are deep continuities between the functioning of the imagination in early childhood and its functioning later," Dr. Paul L. Harris, a psychologist at Harvard and author of "The Work of the Imagination," wrote in an e-mail.

There is little doubt that electronic gadgets engage the mind in different ways than dolls and Legos. Building blocks come to life only with the aid of imagination, while computer games direct and provide their own action. They also bleed into one another, with Donkey Kong skills feeding Mortal Kombat chops feeding Halo, until parent and child are playing on the same screens, competing at games or, later on, designing Web pages or publishing online diaries.

The increasing use of electronic toys troubles Dr. Jerome L. Singer, a professor emeritus of psychology at Yale. "One thing we know is that kids in preschool years need to be in touch with the real world," he said. "No matter how brilliant they are, they're not going to learn to walk, to move, to interact with others unless their hands or feet have a direct role in such activity. Plopping kids in front of a TV or computer cuts away a whole aspect of that development."

At the same time, psychologists say that childhood has always been a long rehearsal for adulthood, and in this context wired play is both adaptive, and natural, behavior.

"This is such a deep-seated part of human nature that changes in technology would be very unlikely to stunt

it," Dr. Alison Gopnik, a psychologist and author of "The Scientist in the Crib," wrote in an e-mail. "Instead, children in a technological world will explore technology and use technological means for their pretend play. Babies already 'pretend' to work on computers, and older children who once may have listened to or told mythical stories, and later in history read books, may do similar things with a computer game like Myst. That makes sense, given that children will end up as adults in a world in which technology and electronics play an increasingly important role."

Some psychologists say that young imaginations, even of preschoolers, are surprisingly good at appropriating electronic imagery. Images from games and shows may linger, but they often mingle with dreams, blend with other fantasies the child has, and are reshaped and recast in a running, magical movie whose script psychologists cannot always predict or interpret.

For example, in a 2001 survey of 1,800 children aged 5 to 12, British researchers found that more than 45 percent had an imaginary companion at some point in their lives, a much higher rate than the authors expected. Imaginary friends, believed by some researchers to foster the development of empathy and sociability, typically are not based on toys, and have more social dimension than would be provided by a game character, a recent analysis found.

It is not even clear how closely the children playing with adult gadgets or games follow their guidelines or intended story lines, researchers say. "A lot of people put down action figures and video games, but kids are acting out their scripts when playing these things, and that ability is going to survive," Professor Cross said.

One piece of childhood that may not endure, as succeeding generations become more plugged in, is the adult notion that children can live for long in their own fantasy world, guarded and preserved by parents.

This idea of a protected childhood is itself an adult invention, a product of the latter part of the 19th century, when Europe's growing middle classes began to shelter children from adult work. A distinct child literature developed soon after: J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan first appeared in 1902; Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic, "The Secret Garden," was published in 1911.

But the protected space of childhood slowly eroded, as children were increasingly exposed to the consumer market - through comic books, then radio, then television. In the accelerating rush toward more wired play, it is not so much childhood that is under threat, some say, as society's idealized and perhaps sentimentalized view of it.

In fact, the move away from reading "The Secret Garden" in a quiet corner, and toward the public extravaganza of Harry Potter - the books, the movies, the action figures and video game - has been going on for a long time.

"We've been worried about the presumed innocence of children being destroyed by too much exposure to media for a hundred years, and this is another iteration of the same phenomenon," said Dr. Peter Stearns, a historian and the provost of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. "I do worry that we have an idealized view of a past childhood that hasn't been true for a long time, and perhaps was never true."