



War Games

25 May 2013 – 9 March 2014

On 25 May, the V&A Museum of Childhood opened **War Games**, an exhibition for adults and children exploring the role of warfare in children's play from 1800 to the present day. The exhibition provides an opportunity for visitors to investigate how toys recreate and represent war, and ask them to question this often controversial subject. Why do children play war games?

War has always been replicated in children's play with toys and games often reflecting contemporary conflict and technology. They have also been used as tools of propaganda, as well as to instil a sense of militarism and nationalism in children. Showcasing over 100 objects from the Museum's own collection, as well as important loans from the Imperial War Museum, the Museum of London, the Spielzeugmuseum, Nuremberg, and private collectors, the exhibition examines the effect of war and conflict on toys and games through four thematic sections: **Playing at War, On the Battlefield, Reality to Fantasy** and **Secret Weapons**.

Playing at War raises the controversial topic of children re-enacting war through a display of historic dressing up clothes, a range of toy weapons and strategy games. Morgan White's photograph of his daughter '**Mum wouldn't let me have toy guns, so I made my own**', 2010, raises issues around gender and illustrates that children create pretend guns despite disapproving parents and teachers.

On the Battlefield provides a chronological overview of combat, exploring how toys have imitated the changing technology of weaponry, new geographies of war zones and the creation of new armies. Exhibits such as a 1920s **German trench and soldier set** and a 2010 **World Peacekeepers Black Hawk helicopter** demonstrate the close relationship of toys and contemporary warfare, and where possible objects represent the different sides of conflict.

The following section **Reality to Fantasy** looks at the change that came in the aftermath of the World Wars. An increased exposure to the brutality of war led to public distaste for war toys and so manufacturers looked to the space race of the 1950s and 1960s, and its absorption into popular culture, leading to space rangers and ray guns. Despite growing opposition to nuclear power, during the Cold War era toy makers and comic publishers used the fear and fascination of the atomic age to create superheroes who fought fantastical battles of 'good' against 'evil'. Protests

against the Vietnam War and media exposure to conflict meant that manufacturers shifted the focus of their war toys from current affairs towards nostalgia, using historic battles, medieval knights and Cowboys and Indians as inspiration.

The final section **Secret Weapons** reveals the use of toys in warfare - to train and influence, to comfort and heal, and to aid escape. It questions the role of war toys as tools of propaganda or patriotism, with games like the 1914 British puzzle **Get Rid of the Huns**. This section also looks at the role of computer games to train troops in the modern tactics of battle.

The exhibition is highly interactive, encouraging children to dress up, play at espionage and engage in many other activities that encourage learning, while photography, film and games all contribute to a diverse and stimulating experience. The display encourages visitors to question their own views and contribute to a debate on playing at war.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

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Admission free, open daily: 10.00 – 17.45, last admission 17.30

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Curator Biographies:

Sarah Wood is a curator at the V&A Museum of Childhood specialising in toys, the history of toy manufacturing and children's costume. She curated the exhibition *Top to Toe: Fashion for Kids* (2008), was part of the exhibition team for *Magic Worlds* (2011) and is the author of *The V&A Museum of Childhood Book of Childhood Things*. Sarah joined the Museum in 2007, having previously worked with textile, literature and social history collections.

Ieuan Hopkins has been the archivist at the V&A Museum of Childhood since September 2009, and is currently cataloguing the archive collections of four major toy manufacturers as well as researching more broadly the history of the British toy making industry. He specialises in modern British history and has previously worked at the Churchill Archives Centre and Parliamentary Archives, and as a freelance curator for contemporary art galleries.