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STORIES IN 8 TO 12 YEAR OLD CHILDREN'S PRETEND PLAY

“I still like to play a little, I still think it’s fun, although I’m already 11 years old. I really can’t say this to anyone in my class, because everybody’s trying to act so ‘cool’.”

Are games and plays disappearing? In many studies there have been expressions of concern, or one is left with an impression that different kinds of games played by children would be getting more and more impoverished in their contents or are even disappearing altogether. In the material I have collected among school children 7–12 years of age in Helsinki and Tallinn for my doctorate thesis on imaginative and role games played by school children, my findings have been contradictory to this proposition. The material collected during the year 2000-2003, containing over 1500 descriptions of games and plays shows that the games played by children are by no means poor in their contents nor are they in the course of disappearing altogether; instead, those games exist in children’s reality, in their world, hidden from the adults.

The themes of the games and plays in my research material range from space adventures to building play cabins, from animal plays to defusing a bomb, from cops and robbers to an archeological museum, and besides these there is a whole variety of different kinds of ball games and chasing games.

Children’s play and game descriptions reveal that games have their lifespans. I’ll observe a game from the point of view of its lifespan. As a term “the lifespan of a game” is a colloquial metaphor but I think it describes very well both the game as a whole and the activity of the game. The games are born, they develop and they live their lives until they come to an end.

It is not unusual that the game is being played for months as the description of a 10-year-old Helsinki girl will soon show. “The Nasty Professor” is a game that has been going on for a long time. The girls have many versions of this game, which shows among other things that the game is under constant change, it lives as it is being played. Some of its events remain through different versions and are repeated over and over. The game is supported by the repeating events in the plot as well as the figures in its core. These form the basic material for the game, keeping this particular game alive. Some of the events happen only once but they play an important role maintaining the intensity of the game. The game assumes new forms, the stories however winding around the figure of the “Nasty Professor”.

“I was about seven years old, and the favourite game that I liked to play with my friend was the “Nasty Professor”. We played it nearly every time we were outside together. There were many versions to it; here I’ll list the most common ones. 1. We were on a climbing apparatus, and the Professor (he was invisible) tried to catch us, but he couldn’t get onto the apparatus. At times we went down to the ground to get some leaves, sand and other “food”. It was while the Professor was sleeping. We made some chow and we “ate” them, and this was repeated over and over again. 2. (This one we played in the winter). We took turns being the Professor and his victim. The one who played the Professor made his victim drink different drinks and poisons and eat all kind of things. When the victim managed to run away, we changed roles and the same thing started from the beginning. Sometimes we made some changes; the Professor for instance took as for prisoners and took us to a little cottage (Girl, 10 years)

Each child carries within him thousands of stories and fairy tales (see Riihelä, 2000; Karlsson, 2000). Many of children’s written descriptions give the impression that the game is formed like stories while it’s being played. Both the fairy tale like games and the games that could actually be reality, are true to a child in the world of games. What makes the game a long term game, interesting enough to inspire the children one month after the other, is the story of the game, the frame it is based on. The game goes on and the story develops at least as long as the children are fascinated by the story.