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Toys as discourse: children's war toys and the war on terror

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War toys of different eras realize the dominant discourses of war of the time, and they do so in a way which allows children to enact these discourses and values in play. This paper examines war toys over the past 100 years before providing a detailed multimodal analysis of contemporary war toys distributed around the planet, mainly by global American corporations, which teach children about the importance of the quick decisive strike, the role of the team and the morality of technology. Through this they convey how conflicts are resolved in today's world, and why. Early on children are recruited not just into the war on terror but also the values of corporate capitalism. The paper ends by looking at some ethnographic data where children play with guns.

Keywords: multimodality; toys; war; terrorism; children; play

Introduction

Throughout the world children and young people play with miniature soldiers, fire plastic machine guns, throw replica grenades, wear special operations play uniforms and participate vicariously in contemporary military conflicts through computer games. In this way they engage, from a very early age, with the dominant discourses of contemporary war, with the question of what contemporary wars are like, who fights them, how and for what reason. Yet, despite more than half a century of critical analysis of war discourses (e.g. Klemperer, 2000; Schlesinger, Murdock, & Elliott, 1983; Chilton, 1985; Lakoff, 1991; Medhurst, Ivie, Scott, & Wander, 1997; Graham, Keenan, & Dowd, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2005), most critics have failed to pay attention to the ways in which discourses of war are made available to children, and to the way children take up these discourses in play, even though children have been, and continue to be, a very important target of many systems of propaganda.

There has been some scholarly work on the role of toys in promoting and legitimizing militarism through study of the nature of industry itself. This leads Turse (2003) to suggest that toys have helped create 'a media culture thoroughly capable of preparing America's children for armed conflict'. Graham and Luke (2003) have shown how this can be explained by the corporate links of the companies making these toys with the military and of course through the way this helps to perpetuate what is the largest sector of global manufacturing: the arms industry (Saul, 1997). Graham and Luke (2003) go as far as including toy manufacture as part of 'military expenditure' (p. 15).

The global toy industry itself is worth $60 billion a year and is dominated by a number of US companies such as Hasbro, who send GI Joe around the planet. These big corporations can each make about $1 billion a year (Hoover's Online, 2008). US stores also dominate the global retail of toys through Toys R Us and the Wal Mart family of outlets, which among other war toys sell Special Forces automatic weapons and 'play suits'. Hasbro distribute and license their products around the planet in Asia, Latin America, Australasia and Europe.

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However, what is also important, and not so well understood, is the way that the toys of different eras have prepared children for specific kinds of warfare, fought in particular ways fused with specific political ideologies about the meaning of war and society itself during those times. This is our interest in this paper.

Toys have played their part in disseminating discourses of war for at least 200 years. The first commercially manufactured toy soldiers were made in France and Germany in the early nineteenth century. Millions of figures representing the soldiers of the imperial era were sold throughout Europe and exported to the colonies. Made from a tin and lead alloy called pewter (Figure 1), these toys represented soldiers in national uniforms in marching and standing poses, so that children could stand them in battlefield formations, as rows of pawns whose movements were masterminded by the strategies of generals. These toys allowed children to play out colonial battles, naturalizing both the activities of empire and the relatively newly established nation states.

In the late nineteenth century the British toy industry introduced hollow casting, which reduced costs and further popularized this kind of toy (Figure 2). The manufacture of toy guns also began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Most were made in the United States and based on then popular genres of boys' crime and mystery fiction, rather than on war. By the 1930s Westerns were in their heyday, and US companies like Mattel sent vast numbers of copies of cowboy revolvers into the world. Toy guns became hooked up with cowboy mythology and the exploration of new frontiers, and with the forms of heroic masculinity that this entailed (Figure 3).

The production of toy soldiers also received new impetus in Germany, where, from the 1930s onwards, high-quality toy soldiers were produced by companies such as Hausser/Elastolin and Lineol (Figure 4). The emphasis was again on soldiers in national uniform, but a greater variety of combat positions was represented, often in fine detail, and the collections included foot soldiers, cavalry, artillery, a huge range of military vehicles, nurses, brass bands and party officials. Initially the German toy industry had made replicas of all the armies of the world, but with the rise of Nazism, the emphasis switched to representations of the German army, so that toys could

Figure 1. Nineteenth-century flat soldiers.

Figure 2. British hollow cast soldiers.

play a significant role in Nazi propaganda, in which, as is well known, winning the hearts and minds of young people was a key element.

World War II erased some of the memory of the horror of World War I, and until the end of the 1970s, toy soldiers, now made of plastic, and including transport, aircrafts, artillery and tanks, remained popular and kept alive the discourse of the good war, fought on the battlefield by the heroic soldiers of national armies to defend freedom. These toys were initially mainly exported to colonies and former colonies of the United States, but towards the end of the 1950s, companies such as Airfix began to systematically export toy soldiers and model aircraft and artillery around the world, and soon World War II troops depicting the British, German, Japanese and US troops were played with around the world. The other wars of the time (Malaysia, Indochina, Korea and North Africa) were not represented and World War II continued to provide the iconography of a clean and heroic war throughout the period.

Meanwhile the production of toy guns continued to be inspired by adventure comics and other popular fictional forms. Branded plastic Tommy guns and Luger pistols found their way
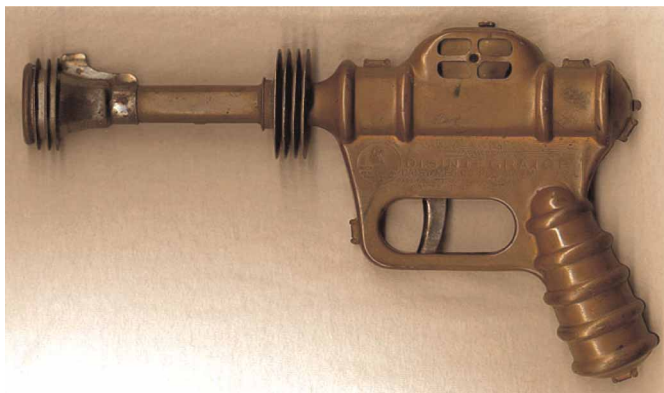

Figure 3. A 1930s US ray gun.

Figure 4. Hausser Nazi figure.

into the hands of children around the world, as fundamental attributes of individual heroic masculinity.

From the 1970s, however, the production of toy soldiers and World War II type weaponry began to decline. On the one hand films such as *Star Wars* introduced an iconography of fictional intergalactic wars which spawned 'spin off' space age toys such as Star Wars light sabres and high-tech water pistols. On the other hand, action figures such as Action Man and GI Joe became increasingly popular. Playing with toy soldiers no longer meant arranging armies in battle formations. It now meant arranging the articulated bodies of action figures in heroic individual poses. The earlier individual hero of crime and Wild West fiction now evolved into the new figure of the rugged and resourceful American Special Forces soldier.

Thus developments in the toy industry kept pace with changing discourses of war, from the colonial wars in which soldiers were cannon fodder for the generals, through the brave wars, fought out on battlefields with equal and equally equipped forces, to the modern Special Forces 'quick strike' operations conducted by small groups of elite soldiers. Traditional toy guns – police revolvers and cowboy pistols – continued to be available, but were often very cheaply produced. The more elaborate and expensive guns were now on the one hand the machine guns, sniper rifles and M-16 familiar from modern war fiction, and on the other hand the 'spin off' guns from fantasy movies such as *Star Wars*.

In this paper we attempt a multimodal semiotic analysis of some contemporary war toys,[1] first analysing the toys themselves, and the way they are packaged, and then looking at the way they are used and talked about by young children.

The iconography of the contemporary war toy

In this section we discuss some key aspects of the iconography of contemporary toy guns and other war toys, and of the images featured on the packaging they come in.

Settings

The 'Action Man Special Forces Play Suit' (Figure 5) comes in a box depicting the jungle, the kind of setting that brings out the elite soldier's special abilities of navigation and searching out enemies, as well as his physical strength and endurance. The 'Power Team Elite' (Figure 6) is manufactured by M&S Toy Centre, a Hong Kong-based company. It consists of a set of three toy figures who come with powerful machine guns and other accessories. The pictures on the back of the box indicate country settings. These are the settings familiar from computer war games, the jungles where drugs smugglers hide out and the country strongholds where rebels must be staked out and hostages rescued. Fantasy gun packaging of course shows fantasy settings, such as a

Figure 5. Special Forces playsuit.

1950s space station with planet with two moons in the background. None of these settings are particularly realistically depicted, and many are drawings rather than photographs. It is as if they must retain a certain degree of unreality, of fantasy modality, even when they depict the kinds of settings where actual operations take place.

Figure 6. Power Team Elite.

The soldiers

The modern soldier has a muscular body, heavy jaws, pronounced cheek bones and a calm but focussed expression, indicating the importance of masculinity, physical power and confident professionalism. They are the archetypal good-looking, tough heroes from the action movies. In contrast to the 'tin soldiers' of earlier periods, they are individuals, or rather different 'types'. The three soldiers of the 'Power Team Elite', for instance, have the same face but different facial hair: one is clean shaven, one has a black goatee beard and the third has a blond moustache. Their limbs, arms and necks can be articulated into a range of tough poses and their hands can grip tubular objects such as guns or flag poles. This myth of physical strength is peculiar since in actual combat in, for instance, Iraq, the Allied Forces use aerial bombardment and missiles to attack. Clearly the emphasis on muscular strength is symbolic. The elite soldier is not just a soldier, but also a symbol of national strength (Newsinger, 1997).

The Toys R Us range of guns includes army as well as Western guns, but in every case the same man is depicted on the packaging. On the 'Cowboy Peacekeeper' box, for instance, he has a slightly more yellow face, a cowboy hat and a red shirt, but underneath that he is exactly the same square-jawed and steely-eyed character. The settings may differ, but heroic masculinity is indivisible, one of a kind.

The 6-year-old boy on the package of the 'Special Forces Play Suit' is of course an exception. With his camouflage suit and cap, face paint and satellite phone he looks a little ill at ease. The image reminds us that we are dealing here with toys which are targeted at very young children – three-year-olds and up, sometimes five-year-olds and up, going by the recommendations on the packaging.

Logos

The logos on the boxes and the guns express the toughness of the elite soldier typographically. The box of the 'Soldier Mac 7' gun, made in China for Toys R Us, features the words 'Elite Operations' cut into a steel plate with a triangle pointing downwards, a logo which resembles the emblems of the US Delta Force, and similar special forces. The words 'Special Forces' on the box of the 'Special Forces Playsuit', are bold and compact, set in a box of what looks like polished steel, and somewhat slanted to give them an edge of dynamism.

Camouflage

A key difference with the iconography of earlier wars is the predominance of camouflage. The soldiers in Special Forces movies such as *Sniper*, *Rambo* and *Predator*, with their camouflage dress and smeared faces, blend into the environment and are at one with the terrain, part man, part beast. Toy guns, too, are painted in camouflage motifs, for instance the 'Soldier Mac 7' (Figure 7). Camouflage has become a ubiquitous motif in fashion, on trousers, rucksacks, shoes, and so on, introducing connotations of the values of the hardy Special Forces soldier into our everyday environment. There are even 'feminine' camouflage fabrics, with patches of pink in between the green and the khaki. Other common toy gun colours are military green and brown, which, though not strictly camouflage, are still motivated by the need to blend in the terrain and sneak up on the enemy.

While these motifs link toy guns to the kind of wars that are now being fought by small professional armies across the world, fantasy guns come in bright, sensual and optimistic colours. The 'Cyberblaster' is silver and bright green, and the 'Power Fazer' is available in silver and red as well as in bright blue, a world away from the duller camouflage colours of the more realistic guns.

Figure 7. 'Soldier Mac 7'.

Technology

A key aspect of the dominant discourse of contemporary warfare is the technological superiority of the Special Forces soldiers. Everywhere they are depicted with sophisticated technology such as night vision and with high-tech weapons that connote sophistication, precision, organization and intelligence. This too finds its way into war toys for young children. The Child 'Action Man Special Forces Playsuit', for instance, includes a satellite phone, and the toy guns we have discussed signify high technology – telescopic sights, locking mechanisms, guards for spent cartridge discharge, sound suppressors, etc. As most of these features are not functional, the detail is symbolic. It serves to signify the importance of technology and the superiority of the elite soldier.

In the space age guns the symbolic function of technological detail is even more pronounced. The 'Power Fazer' for instance, has a functional trigger, but its cocking device is rudimentary and its revolving magazine is replaced by a red plexiglass window that lights up when the trigger is pulled. The 'Cyberblaster' looks more like a 1950s space ship than a gun, with, on top, a green plexiglass feature that resembles a World War II war plane cockpit and lights up when the recharger slide is operated.

Sounds

All these guns produce sounds which are not, as might have been expected, the sounds of smaller or larger explosions, but more symbolic sounds. Pulling the trigger of the 'Soldier Mac 7' produces a complete soundtrack. We hear a voice shout 'Fire!', then a burst of machine gun fire. Next comes the voice again, shouting 'Fire, fire' and another burst of machine gun fire. This is followed by a single shot that sounds more like a grenade launcher, and again the call 'Fire', followed by six sounds, a short burst of machine gun fire, another burst at higher pitch, another one at the first pitch level, then another one at the second pitch level, and finally a different laser sounding burst and one more burst of machine gun fire. The sequence ends with the voice shouting 'Don't move! Drop your gun!' This again brings out that these guns do not teach children any actual skills such as accurately aiming at a target or operating technical devices. They are representations of war – but *interactive* representations that allow the child to become physically, actively, involved in the representation.

In the futuristic guns, the role of sound is even more removed from direct mechanical noise. Some come close to doubling as a kind of musical instrument which can be 'played' to some degree, for instance by means of the trigger or recharger slide of the gun, which can adjust

the volume or produce rhythmic variation. The 'Power Fazer' does not produce the sound of shots or machine gun fire, but emits two tones, one a wheezy, grainy drone, the other a clear electronic tone. These tones are modulated by a kind of vibrato and an overall tonal direction, and display some variation in their onsets (more or less strong, loud and sudden onset) or endings (more or less gradual dying out). They resemble the soundtracks of science fiction movies with their eerily warbling drones and tense, suspenseful vibratos. The Cyberblaster has a pad from which six noises can be chosen and its recharger slide activates a scale of bubbly noises which, again, combine a pure tone with a rougher, rather r-like tone.

The enemy

In strong contrast to the earlier toy soldiers, the enemy is not represented, as if it is more important here for the child to focus on him- or herself, to identify with the tough, masculine, resourceful and technology-savvy hero, than to imagine an enemy. When we asked children who they were fighting with their toy guns, they did not have specific enemies in mind, just 'the bad guys'.

Modality

We have already pointed to the limited functionality of the toy gun, taking this as an argument for its predominantly representational function. Another argument can be added. Despite its impressive visual and aural detail, the toy gun is surprisingly lightweight and insubstantial. On the tactile level it is as far from 'the real thing' as it could be.

In social semiotics, the concept of 'modality' focuses on the signifiers that signify as 'how real' a representation should be taken (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Machin, 2007). Just how such signifiers should be interpreted depends on specific criteria for what counts as 'real', and different criteria may apply in different contexts. In the case of visual communication (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), the dominant criterion is 'naturalistic': the more a representation of something looks like what we would see if we were able to see that something in reality, the higher its modality. In the case of objects, the naturalistic criterion would be signified by various dimensions of tactility, including weight: the more an object that represents some other object feels and handles like that other object, the higher its modality. On this count, the tactile modality of toy guns is low, even though their visual modality may be high – some guns come close to being replicas of actual guns.

However, Kress and Van Leeuwen also mention another modality criterion, the 'sensory' criterion: the more a representation of something affects the viewer in the same way as the something that is being represented, the higher its 'sensory' modality. On this count fantasy guns differ from more realistic guns. While the more realistic guns are visually, and to some extent aurally, 'documentary', the fantasy guns sacrifice verisimilitude for pleasure and sensation – bright colours, flickering lights, quasi-musical sound:

In many cultures, children's toys are miniature versions of the objects the child will handle as an adult. As the child grows up, the functionality of the toys increases. Ruth Benedict (1954, p. 24) explains the role of children's toys in traditional Cheyenne culture:

> At birth the little boy was presented with a toy bow, and, from the time he could run about, serviceable bows suited to his stature were specially made for him by the man of the family. Animals and birds were taught him in a graded series beginning with those most easily taken, and, as he brought in his first of each species, his family duly made a feast of it, accepting his contribution as gravely as the buffalo his father brought. When he finally killed a buffalo, it was only the final step of his childhood conditioning, not a new adult role.

Psychologists such as Bruner (1968) Trevarthen (1993) and Winnicott (1971) have written of toys as transitional objects, through which children are able to practice their behaviour towards real things in the world. War toys are not of this kind. Children playing with guns are not practicing

for their later role as soldiers, but that does not mean that toy guns do not introduce children to the values of the society in which they are growing up. They do. They convey to the child the nature of a certain kind of masculinity and masculine valour, and the signifiers that express them. They convey how conflicts are resolved in today's world, and why. And they do so in a way which allows children to enact these discourses and values in play, to symbolically participate in them.

A Gallup poll (2000) revealed that half of US mothers interviewed agreed that toy guns contribute to later criminal behaviour, but this is not the point. It is not the case that children who play with guns become criminals as a result of this, but it is the case that most children in the world today get to understand the contemporary discourse of war, and to experience its attractions.

Playing with guns

We interviewed 15 children between the ages of 8 and 10, six girls and nine boys. We showed them the guns, asked them what the guns were for, and also asked them to show us how to hold the guns. In addition, some interviews were arranged with children from China and India.

The children were all able to 'place' the realistic guns. They knew what Special Force soldiers are, and they were familiar with their characteristics, their qualities and the kind of missions on which they are dispatched. A boy from Wales:

Interviewer:	What kind of soldiers use this gun?
Tim (9):	Special soldiers
Interviewer:	How are they special?
Tim:	They are the cleverest and best trained. They can beat whole armies on their own.
Interviewer:	Who do they fight against?
Tim:	Bad people.

An Indian child was equally au fait with the profile of the Special Forces soldier:

| Interviewer: | What makes the best soldier? |
| Amrit (9): | They have to be strong and shoot well. They have to survive in difficult places. |

Like teenagers playing computer war games (Machin & Suleiman, 2006), many of these children are already aware of the wars in which Special Forces soldiers operate:

Interviewer:	In Iraq are there lots of well trained soldiers?
Jon (10):	Yes
Interviewer:	Do people need them to be there?
Jon:	Well, if they don't there will be no-one to protect them.

However, that does not mean they necessarily would like to be soldiers themselves:

Interviewer:	Would you like to be a soldier?
Guo (11):	I like to pretend I am a soldier that carries out daring missions and stops all the bad people. But I wouldn't really want to be a soldier. I would not like to be away from home.
Interviewer:	Do you have toy guns?
Guo:	I have a long one and a hand gun.
Interviewer:	What games do you like to play with the guns?
Guo:	We get the bad people, fight in jungles.
Interviewer:	Where is the jungle here in our country?
Guo:	(doesn't know)

Such discourses have already become part of children's mental furniture at an early age. They know what these guns are for, they know what kind of soldiers use them, and they know that these soldiers are 'the good guys'. This does not necessarily mean that they will become soldiers themselves. It can mean, however, that they will convey the values of the modern Special Forces hero in other, more symbolic ways, through the clothes they wear, or through their bodily hexis.

Figure 8. Engaging all parts of the body.

Most of the children we interviewed could confidently strike poses with the guns, though they engaged with these poses to different degrees. Some assumed a tense bodily stance, ready for the recoil, as well as a concentrated or even aggressive facial expression (Figure 8), others mimicked the concentrated aiming, but stood in a more relaxed pose (Figure 9).

Although the image of the Special Forces hero is decidedly masculine, many girls experiment with it as well. The girl in Figure 10 may hold the gun as if it is an attribute in a fashion photograph, but the girl in Figure 11 knows exactly what to do with it, though it should be added that she was doing this to show her younger brother how to hold the gun.

In the colonial era, many Dutch people had wooden figures of half naked Javanese girls on their mantelpieces. It was a minor way of symbolically participating in the colonial empire of 'our Indonesia'. Today's military-inspired fashions and hair styles play a similar role as the banal, everyday signifiers of the hegemony of a new kind of war, and the banal, everyday celebration of the kinds of heroes it fosters, not just in war, but also in other spheres of life, such as business: tough, technologically savvy hard men, loyal team players who nevertheless have a touch of individual style, masters of the quick, decisive strike.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the country that dominates the world arms trade has also been the leader in sending plastic toy guns around the planet. It is clear that American industry, global economic ambitions and the military have worked in harmony, especially since the end of World War II. Before this time we can see the former colonial powers using toys in order to allow children to symbolically align themselves with their interests and then afterwards to celebrate their righteousness through the action and fun of a 'good war'. Later the United States expanded its manufacturing, economic and political interests around the planet. This was always systematically carried out through the industrial/political/military complex. The entertainments industry
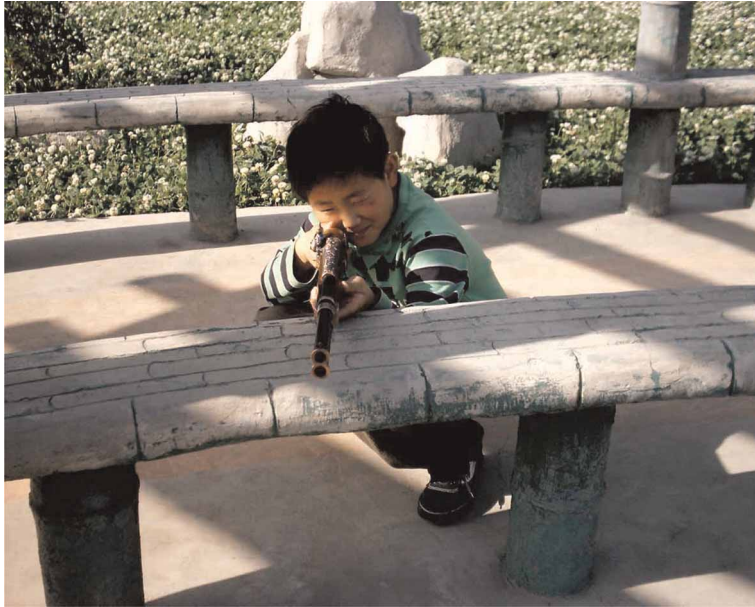
Figure 9. Relatively relaxed pose.

was an integral part of this process. Now we find Toys R Us, Hasbro, Mattel and other global corporations, all with corporate links to the US military, sending their own contemporary models of war to children around the planet through special-forces play sets, weapons and clothing. Yet the discourses of war, the kind of people who fight it and how, must, like the war toys of
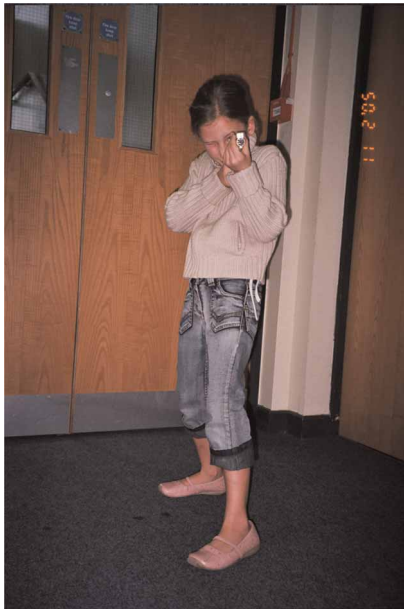

Figure 10. The gun as fashion attribute.

Figure 11. Girl striking a soldier's pose.

former eras, also be understood as realizing discourses of related forms of social and political organization. Whereas earlier war toys represented first massive passive anonymous armies, and then active heroic large armies that symbolized society as a whole, contemporary war toys suggest individualism, the small flexible team able to operate swiftly. In each case the toys represent not only war itself but a 'body politic' (Graham & Luke, 2003), teaching children about just what society is and what kinds if identities exist within it.

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Theo Van Leeuwen is Dean for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. His publications include *Introducing social semiotics* (2004), *A handbook of visual analysis* (2001) with Carey Jewitt and *Reading images* (2006) with Gunter Kress. He is co-editor of the journal *Visual Communication*.

Note

1. In October 2004, we collected all toy guns then available in the major toy stores in Cardiff, a total of 25, as well as a range of toy soldier figures.

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