
If Winnicott could make toys...

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Abstract: Donald Winnicott's concept of transitional objects and phenomena is recognised as a source of inspiration for the development of design ideas for play. This paper attempts to translate principles of his work in the field of psychotherapy into criteria for design related to play. The concept of the transitional object was analysed in terms of user requirements at different ages and in different everyday contexts. The idea of 'transitional space' was translated into the need for play objects to support specific physical actions while remaining unspecific with regard to the potential meanings ascribed to these actions.

Keywords: toy design; transitional object; transitional space; Winnicott; play.

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1 Introduction

When designing for play designers look for inspiration from the social sciences. When the users of designs are children, then developmental psychology becomes an obvious

choice. The quest to understand what motivates children to play and what their skills and feelings are is complicated in two ways. One is that empathy and understanding with respect to another generation is more difficult than with one's own – imagining what goes on in the head of a two-year-old is nearly impossible for an adult. The other concerns the fact that, for play, neither means nor ends are clearly defined and in that sense, they are not open for analysis in the same way as, say, the design of a chair or a tool is. In comparison, the function of play seems rather fuzzy and abstract, it points at what individuals want to do rather than what they have to, or need to do.

When designing a toy developmental psychology can be used in two principal ways. The first is to gain insight into cognitive, social and emotional changes from birth to adulthood and the developmental tasks accompanying them such as learning to walk or to use language, or the types of play that emerge. These descriptions help to constrain the design space with regard to abilities to act and the domain of development to be addressed. Toys resulting from this are learning tools with added characteristics that reflect the ideas about fun and preferences of the specific group it is aimed at. These objects are, in a way, there to guide children to do what we (as adults in a certain culture) assume to be important for their successful development. Children may happily embrace these toys, and parents may happily buy them since they fit both sets of needs.

Despite the success of these toys, criticism emerged (notably in the 1970s) because they heavily prescribe actions and their meanings. Barthes (2009/1972, p.39) summarises the basic idea in the context of French toys made to allow imitation of the adult world: "...faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it." The type of imitative toy ready for consumption that he criticises has a vital role in bringing up children by communicating the cultural context of objects and actions. However, this type of toy represents the outside-in approach to children's play suggesting cultural specific actions. Less attention is given to the rather more challenging, inside-out approach in which play is seen as the expression of a child's inner world. Toys designed from the inside out should help a child to explore and test its ideas about reality by creating individually meaningful ways of engaging with the environment.

In psychology, the inside-out approach is taken mainly by therapists, who try to understand and guide an individual's experience of reality towards a situation, in which a person's constructive potential can be realised, that is, transferred from an inner to an outer reality.

Donald Winnicott (1896–1971), working as a therapist in the psychoanalytical tradition, understood play as the process and medium in which the experience of self and reality can be created and changed. Through the idea of the transitional object and its creation through play, he explicitly addressed the role of the environment for the development of the self. This paper attempts to highlight the relevance of Winnicott's approach for how and why to design for play. Far from being the only psychological approach with the potential to inspire designers of artefacts for children, it is one of the few concepts which uses an inside-out approach and which explicitly points at the role of objects. However, transforming his ideas into design is not an easy task. As in any interdisciplinary enterprise, true understanding requires a dialogue. This paper is the result of a dialogue between students of design and the present authors who are psychology academics studying the experience of play. Together, we explored Winnicott's ideas and tried to make explicit how his thinking could be used for

developing design ideas for toys. The following does not replace the reading of Winnicott's work; but we hope that it will be instrumental in performing the transition from Winnicott's thinking about therapy to a way of thinking about design for play.

2 The general approach

Winnicott's work concentrates on the development of the self as the product of a changing interaction between an infant's inner (subjective) world and an external (objective) reality. The concepts of transitional objects and phenomena give descriptions of interactive structures, processes and conditions under which a child, more or less successfully, develops an autonomous self and positive, effective relationships with the physical and social environment. Replace with: Relating inner (subjective) and outer (objective) realities is seen as a lifelong task. Therefore the general structure and processes Winnicott describes apply across the lifespan.

Play as the activity mediating between the inner and outer worlds has been described by him as a strategy to explore, try out and create relationships between inner and outer worlds using the entire vocabulary of human emotions and behaviour. In this sense, play is the creation and recreation of the self – the realm in which Winnicott developed his psycho-therapeutic approach for children and adults. Translating his ideas into inspiration for designs supporting play can either focus on the idea of the transitional object or on shaping transitional spaces in which creative play can take place.

This paper will neither give an overview of Winnicott's work nor do justice to his conceptual contribution to psychoanalysis. Instead, it will try to see his work through the eyes of a designer looking for inspiration. With this goal in mind, it seemed most productive to concentrate on Winnicott's theory of development focusing on the ever changing relationship between self and environment. Three aspects of Winnicott's work will be addressed:

- The transitional process, one example of which is the change from the infant's experienced oneness with the mother to the experience of an autonomous 'me' as separate from the environment – the 'not me'.
- The transitional object, as an object which facilitates this transition.
- The transitional space, in which the transition takes place through interaction.

Terms like 'transition' and 'space' that have clear physical definitions are used by Winnicott in a metaphorical sense to describe changing experiences. Some characteristics of the terms will be preserved such as a transition describing a change in state. However, the states involved are experiential, and the process of change as such is therefore not observable. Trying to interpret those terms in a physical way can therefore lead to misunderstandings. In the following, the specific experiential or phenomenological meaning of these terms will be described as clearly as possible within Winnicott's framework.

3 Transitional process

The transitional process described by Winnicott refers to a developmental process of changing self perception. The processes involved are experiences of interaction that lead an infant to recognise its own physical and mental identity. One main assumption of psychoanalysis is that at birth a human infant is fully dependent on its mother – is more or less ‘one’ with her. This implies that there is no distinction between ‘me’ and ‘not me’, that is, between subjective and objective being. During the first years of life, a child learns to become an individual in its own right and establishes its subjective and internal ‘self’ as distinct from the external physical and social world. The transition in this context is the process from being one with the mother to becoming an individual with an autonomous notion of self. The quality of interaction with the environment in which this process takes place is of crucial importance to whether and how an autonomous self is established. To express this in design-relevant terms, the self is the result of interacting with objects in the environment. Objects in this context are everything which is ‘not me’, that is, human beings as well as material objects. The reliability of the external world for meeting a child’s needs shape expectations concerning future interactions and their instrumentality in reaching goals and meeting needs. It is in this context that the responsiveness of the mother to her child’s needs plays a crucial role and is supposed to shape an infant’s initial expectations for an effective interaction with the environment. Transitional processes in which the subjective idea of an object is confronted with the real object through interaction take place in many forms throughout the lifespan. An everyday example is the establishment of a friendship. It is the idea of and the need for a friend related to the behaviour of a person (e.g. skills and interests) which can make him a friend. Friends do not exist independently of the subjective idea of a friend, yet it is the reality of their behaviour which can make a person a friend. The correspondence between inner idea and outer reality needs to be sufficient to satisfy needs, for example, for sharing an adventure or belonging to a group. In terms of physical objects, there needs to be a ‘good enough’ correspondence between the imagined interaction and the real one. An old curtain is the perfect outfit for a princess as long as it matches the imagination of action, for example, the train of delicate material following the movements of the princess when walking down the real stairs of the imagined castle.

Early in development, picking up the correspondence between inner and outer object is based on directly available action possibilities provided by an object, for example, the corner of the blanket to suck on. With growing autonomy and ability to act the correspondence can take on more complex, abstract and symbolic forms such as a stone symbolising a shared experience. Cultural forms of those special objects include, for example, the Guatemalan ‘worry people’, tiny dolls which, when kept under the pillow during the night, will take over your worries and problems so that you can sleep well. In all three examples, it is the combination of imagination and actions in reality which constitute the transitional process.

4 Transitional object

The term ‘object’ is seen here in the widest sense as a complementary to ‘subject’ and, therefore, includes the material and social environment available to a child to satisfy its needs. For the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate on physical objects.

'Transitional' refers to the subjective meaning projected onto an object for the purpose of need satisfaction. While objects can have widely-shared meanings such as the suitability of chairs, Winnicott concentrates on individual emotional needs, such as feeling secure and autonomous. In this sense, the transitional object is the vehicle for the transitional process described above.

Interacting with physical objects cannot replace human interaction. The initial ability to relate to objects is, in a way, the consequence of what Winnicott calls initial 'good enough' human interaction. Meaningful interactions with objects require the expectation of potential control which, in typical development, is learned in interactions between mother and child. Objects do not cause, but can contribute to, establishing a confident and trustful self. This contribution is made possible when an object readily invites physical interaction corresponding to a child's needs and/or imagination. Winnicott specifically addresses the role of objects facilitating the feeling of protection and with it the elimination of anxiety (Parsons, 2000). In a broader sense, the role of objects is described in the context of a child's need to playfully create meaning. It is the subjective meaning related to the possibilities of objective physical interaction which shape or give reality to the notion of 'self'. Winnicott looked at objects only in terms of what they say about the child. Trying to turn his theory around to describe objects which will meet a child's needs is open to different interpretations. Inspired by Winnicott's writing, the interpretation outlined here concentrates on strategies for idea development in design.

The transitional object is, according to this theory, the first material object a child might take possession of. However, transitional objects can be chosen and used at any time of life in diverse contexts (Arthern and Madill, 1999). What makes an object transitional is the fact that in addition to its own objective physical characteristics it embodies or signifies the subjective idea of a relationship. In this way, subjective meaning becomes materialised and expressed, helping to overcome anxiety in absence of the actual object of attachment (e.g. mother, friend, lover, therapist, place or pet). A transitional object can take any shape from a stone to a soft toy to an iPhone™. Ascribing meaning to it which exceeds its physical characteristics makes the object part of both the subjective and objective world of its owner. Transitional objects are part of what Winnicott calls 'transitional phenomena' in which the inner meaning or representation of objects guides the interaction with the outer object in the environment. What Winnicott calls the 'good enough' inner object (in the first instance, the mother as she is experienced by the infant) shows a correspondence to the outer object (in this case, the responsiveness of the real mother), which through interaction enables satisfaction of needs to a sufficient extent and in a sufficient amount of cases. It is this sufficiency which creates trust in the environment and trust in the self to be able to successfully interact to reach goals.

While in the beginning of development, there is a minimum of control and autonomy in reaching goals, unfolding interaction with the environment as well as biological growth bring about ever more complex ways in which a child can engage physically, socially and cognitively. This engagement leads to an increasingly objective representation of the world on the one hand, and on the other it shapes growing expectations about one's own abilities to reach ever changing goals resulting in ever changing internal objects. A sufficient correspondence between inner and outer object or inner and outer world is a condition for a healthy notion of self. The self in this sense is not a static but a lifelong process of change. A transitional object is part of the real world as well as part of the imaginary world of its owner. A consequence of this is that it is

impossible to design a transitional object as such – it has to be chosen to fulfil this function. Design therefore becomes a matter of likelihood to be chosen.

The first possession of a transitional object is seen as the result of the initial processes of detachment of the baby from the mother and with it the active encounter (or building of relationships) with the physical world to meet its needs. Winnicott (1971), when observing and describing the special relationship infants can have to objects, pointed at object characteristics which can almost be seen as design criteria for this particular case, in which the object ‘represents’ the mother during periods of her absence.

It must be possible to cuddle the object affectionately.

While the tactile characteristics of an object which can be cuddled are relatively constant, the conditions under which this action can be performed change dramatically in the first two years of life: A 9 months old will be able to cuddle only relatively small objects or parts of objects which must be either within reach or can be reached by crawling. Being able to suck on parts of it is also important. Walking children will tend to transport their special object which constrains its size, weight and shape in different ways from those that apply earlier.

It must never be changed unless the child changes it.

This requirement refers to the unquestioned ownership and control that the child has over the object. This requires an object which can be available in the variety of situations which shape the child’s life, particularly those which potentially cause anxiety.

It must survive instinctual loving as well as pure aggression.

The object must be durable, versatile and resistant to forces as well as afford tenderness.

“Yet it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.”
(Winnicott, 1971, p.7)

The reactivity of the object to an infant’s action is to an extent mirroring the responsiveness and autonomy of the mother. At the level of design this requirement should be translated in an abstract rather than a literal way e.g. at the level of resistance and elasticity of the material in relation to the pressure a baby’s hand can exert when grasping or pressing it. Being able to reshape the object into different positions is another example.

Cuddly toys have, overtime become ever more resilient, softer and ‘reactive’ to manipulation. It seems that this teaches a designer more or less what he already knows just by looking at the market, with the addition of a kind of fancy rationale. However, applying the concept of a transitional object in its lifelong sense to design means to apply its principles rather than simply using the requirements mentioned above as a recipe.

When trying to develop ideas for the design of a potential first possession for an infant, that is, a design which has a high-likelihood of being chosen and which will be retained for a longer period of time – the following questions could be asked:

- 1 What are the conditions under which a transitional object might be required, that is, those which lead to anxiety and the need for protection or reassurance (being alone, being separated from the family, taking risks, change of environment, challenges; etc.)?
- 2 How are the needs for a transitional object embedded in everyday life (going to sleep alone; venturing out to explore; staying at Grandma's; having to play a role in the school play or getting tired)?
- 3 What are other (non-anxiety-related) types of object-centred actions which are typical for a certain stage in development? Long term use of a transitional object will be more likely if it affords playing in a variety of ways, meeting the changing needs, abilities and interests of children between approximately 9 months and 4 or 5 years.
- 4 What is the changing nature of 1,2 and 3 (e.g. events causing anxiety at 9 months of age are quite different from those at 4 years)?

An object that is likely to be chosen as a transitional object should accommodate behavioural change. Early in development, the simulation of continuous contact with the mother (e.g. through smell) is crucial. Later on, it might be the fact that a transitional object can be carried around easily and still later it might be a character the object stands for which is associated with shared experiences or stories told by parents. These changing needs can be carried by the same or different objects depending on the level of ambiguity they provide. Ultimately, it is the child who will decide what usage the object will have in different situations and at different points in development.

5 Transitional space

Note that the word 'space' is used in a metaphorical sense of mental space rather than in the concrete sense of physical locality. Winnicott, when trying to explain this, uses phrases describing localities which refer to a state of mind such as 'I know where I am with this' or being in 'seventh heaven'. If the transitional object is the embodiment of the relationship between inner and outer world, the transitional space is the potential playground (or the state of mind) in which a child or a society actively creates its identity and the meaning of objects through play. Winnicott calls this 'third space' the cultural space (Winnicott, Spengler and Davis 1989). Through play, a baby is creating the mother as an independent object as well as the autonomous self. Through play, a society establishes its cultural identity and autonomy. The possibilities for play arising from this space (or state of mind) enable human beings to create their individuality or sense of self beyond biological drives and environmental constraints.

Or as Winnicott observes (1971, p.132): "[t]he phenomena of the play area have infinite variability, contrasting with the relative stereotypy of phenomena that relate either to personal body functioning or to environmental actuality".

Just as with the transitional object, a transitional space cannot be designed since it is a state of mind rather than a physical space. However, the probability of reaching the state of mind that enables play might be influenced by the social and physical environment in two ways:

- 1 To play an individual needs to feel protected and confident. Design can support this need (as discussed for the transitional object).
- 2 A high-level of ambiguity in the environment facilitates the creation of meaning rather than its mere recognition. Ambiguity in this sense means offering various action possibilities to an individual without determining the potential meaning of these actions. Playing with an object in Winnicott's sense means to create the meaning of it. Through play the inner world of the child becomes expressed. Designing opportunities to maximise this requires under-specification rather than over-specification of objects with regard to their potential meaning. Instead of trying to design for specific preconceived meanings design should aim for a highly diverse range of possible actions, the specific meaning of which is actually not the business of the designer but of the user. A rocking horse designed to look like a horse suggests not only rocking but also a meaning of this rocking as being on horseback. This imposed meaning makes other interpretations of the object less likely. In contrast, a piece of furniture like the Stokke® Hippo™ rocking chair¹ has an abstract shape, does not look like a toy but affords acting in a multitude of ways to children and parents inviting them to play in Winnicott's sense, creating diverse meanings.

6 Conclusions

Winnicott's concept of play as the process through which a human being finds their individuality and sense of self is in many ways unique and has inspired therapists, artists, musicians and educators, as well as designers. What makes his thinking appealing for a designer is the way in which the inner world of a person is expressed in the meaning given to active encounters with objects. This implies that the meaning of action in the physical or biomechanical sense is ambiguous or open to interpretation. The possibility of ascribing a range of different meanings to one physical action enables self expression in play. The paradoxical characteristic of a transitional object to be part of the inner and outer world at the same time is carried by the possibility of physically manipulating the object on one hand and the freedom to decide what the meaning of this manipulation is on the other.

Whilst the design of a tool, for example, requires minimising ambiguity of meaning, toys in the spirit of Winnicott require maximising ambiguity, enabling many possible interpretations for the function of an object. This is what enables the transition between inner and outer worlds.

This translation of Winnicott's concept into design-relevant terms is one possible interpretation using an inside-out metaphor of children's play. An outside-in approach to design suggests the use of an object in a certain way that reveals a certain meaning (e.g. a toy sword or an arcade game). In an inside-out approach, the designer offers a variety of interactions with the objects which the user then fills with meaning. The designer has still to provide affordances for action at a physical level which might be connected, for example, to the emerging motor skills of a certain age group and/or to a context of use such as travelling. However, the design leaves the specific meaning of the interaction with the object up to the user. A ready made princess costume would be an example of outside-in design whereas, the 'curtain as dress for a princess' mentioned earlier is an example of an inside-out approach. So, the question is – what is left for the designer to do

in an inside-out approach? What does the curtain have that the princess costume does not? The short answer is openness to interpretation. The key for design ideas here lies in the ability to look at actions in a way that allows discrimination between physical needs for action and openness to interpretation of those actions through use. When observing children dressing up and engaging in role play a designer could try to analyse types of lower level actions which together enable the higher order meaning of dressing up, and the physical role objects have in those actions. So, instead of designing a princess costume, the approach might be to design a tool kit for dressing up which invites the creation of costumes of all kinds for a group of users with specific skills and abilities such as children 3–6 years of age. This leads to questions such as: given the action capacities and the imagination of 3–6 year olds what are relevant characteristics of material for the action of dressing up? What size and shape should parts of the tool kit have to enable different ways of wearing it, and how can it easily be fixed to the body? What is the optimal amount of different pieces to guarantee simplicity of use and a maximum of potentially meaningful combinations? As the example shows, under-specification of objects in terms of higher order meaning does not imply that there are no concrete design requirements. The criterion for success is the use of the design in multiple ways.

Applying Winnicott's inside-out way of thinking to design that aims at the playful and creative use of objects at any age is, in our view, the most inspirational aspect of his work for designers.

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Note

¹<http://www.backinaction.co.uk/hippo>.