

Fifty Shades of Toys: Notions of Play and Things for Play in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* Canon

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Abstract

According to cultural studies scholars, the Zeitgeist of current times is ludic in nature, meaning that play(-fulness) is taking center stage. Although play may be based on physical interaction with other players, toys of various kinds influence greatly how contemporary understandings of play are formed. At the same time, adult toys, also called sex toys or novelties, are gaining popularity and becoming more common objects in adult play activities.

This article explores the playful dimensions of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* canon by investigating how notions of toys and adult play are represented in the books and the film. As E.L. James's working title for her first version for the book was *Master of the Universe*, it is plausible to perceive a connection between the literary work and the realms of toy culture. *Master of the Universe* also links to action figures launched by Mattel in the 1980s ('Masters of the Universe'), might imply that the main character Christian Grey is an action figure of sorts; but, contrary to the idea of toys, one that is not willing to surrender to be played with by others. Instead, he is the master player in control of a Playroom and an aptly curated collection of toys, and the one playing with human 'dolls' as the architect of sexually charged scenes.

This article argues that the trilogy (and the first cinematic adaptation), in the playful appropriation of various instruments for play, may have helped to contribute in the prevailing megatrend of toyification of everyday life; encouraging both producers and users of adult toys to rethink the aesthetic, audience and appropriation of sex toys.

You are master of your universe
(James 2012b: 454)

'So it begins': Entering the Playroom

I wonder briefly what the drawers actually *do* hold.
Do I want to know?
(emphasis in original, James 2012a: 98)

In the time of the ludic turn, play is taking centre stage (Sutton-Smith 1997; Combs 2000). One tendency in what Joost Raessens (2006) describes as the 'ludification of culture' is the now recognised interest of mature players in various playthings and games. However, society and governmental organisations

tend to have specific ideas about what constitutes the 'play age' of a person. The rhetoric surrounding play situates this form of human behaviour in the context of childhood.

It is generally accepted that while children are expected to immerse themselves in play involving materials such as toys, adults can maintain a connection to play by maintaining a playful attitude. According to scholar Brian Sutton-Smith, 'the playful is the modern way we idealize play' (1997: 148). As a celebrated mindset, playfulness means first and

foremost an attitude, not an activity; for instance, Paulette Guitard et al. (2005) identify ‘creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity’ as key components of playfulness (2005: 12). Contemporary play scholars such as Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin explain playfulness as a positive mood state that may or may not be manifested in observable behaviour (Bateson and Martin 2013: 2). If play manifests in more overt activities, then it is more likely to be a case of children’s play.

Yet in the Western context the ‘everywhereness’ of toys, as tools and instruments for play (Heljakka 2013; Sicart 2014), is indisputable. Since industrialisation, there has been a prevailing notion that children are the primary audience for toys. As Flemming Mouritsen points out, toys are regarded as one of the classic media of children’s culture (Mouritsen 1999: 61). However it is instead adults, according to some sources, who are the audience for the objects that we now refer to as toys (see: Daiken 1963). In the Western hemisphere, mass-produced toys of all kinds, ranging from cheaply manufactured street market items to luxury branded and priced toys, are commodities linked to the wider structures of consumer capitalism. The acquisition, collection and consumption of toys are guided by identifications related to lifestyle, gender and class. Objects, vehicles and environments, as well as people, may convey playfulness; but play only happens when things are being appropriated in play through manipulative or imaginative actions—when toyed with. In other words, play is an activity in which both physical materials and conceptual ideas are potentially transformed.

The play age seems to have risen: for example in digital games, the age of the average player is well over 35 years. Even though many understand the positive and therapeutic values of transgenerational play, it is rarely spoken of in reference to material playthings and even less so in reference to adults as toy owners. Nevertheless, there is evidence that adults are increasingly opening the doors to their toy closets (Heljakka 2013). Mainly thanks to developments made possible by the advances in communicational technologies and the growing popularity of social media platforms, we are witnessing a gradual

emergence of the once ephemeral phenomenon of adult toy play with miniatures, construction toys and traditional toy characters such as dolls, action figures and soft toys (Figure 1).¹ However, in the case of adults, the activity of play is believed not to manifest in reference to toys, but more so in relation to other activities, such as sports, arts, or sex. In William Betcher’s words, ‘sex is the last great preserve of adult play, where even the dourest pillars of our community are permitted to whisper sweet nothings’ (1987: III).

In the time of the ludic turn, sexuality seems to have developed into a particular area of interest for the designers, makers and producers of sex toys who capitalise on playfulness. According to a definition in Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a sex toy may refer to ‘(a) a person viewed as a sexual plaything; (b) a device or object designed for sexual stimulation (as a dildo, vibrator, etc.) or to enhance sexual pleasure or performance’ (OED 2015). The history of sex toys illustrates a trajectory from mechanical and industrially-produced domestic appliances to pornographic commodities, and later to cute, colourful, humorous and sometimes character-based toys. Today, some of these ‘erotic accessories’ are designed and sold by



Figure 1: A Christian Grey soft toy produced by Vermont Teddy Bear (see: Lee 2014). The *Fifty Shades* brand seems to have provoked interest far beyond the sex toys market; licensing deals have entered product categories such as teddybears and board games.

women, for women (see: Comella 2004; Smith 2007). Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (2015) suggest that female sexuality is consumer-oriented and, as such, 'sexiness' has become a consumer good (see also: Attwood 2005). Women's erotica, for instance, has according to Jane Juffer become an increasingly mainstream consumer product that plays a part in the feminisation of sex, or what she terms the 'domestication of pornography' (1998: 233). Juffer writes, 'sex aids have more recently come to be understood in terms of recreation. They have become "toys" just as sex has lost its significance as a form of reproduction or relationship and become a form of "play"' (1998: 83). Similarly, in a study of UK retailer Ann Summers' sex-themed parties, Merl Storr (2003) suggests that these events enable women to transgress social taboos in the comfort of their homes, particularly those surrounding sexual play and the use of erotic accessories (Storr 2003).

Since the launch of E L James's erotic trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the sex toy industry has reported significant increases in the sales of erotic toys in Western markets. This phenomenon can be linked to the exposure of the series: *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012a) stayed at the top of *USA Today*'s best-selling book list for 20 weeks and sold approximately 70 million copies worldwide (Trachtenberg 2013). However, I argue it is significant that throughout the trilogy—consisting of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2012a), *Fifty Shades Darker* (James 2012b), and *Fifty Shades Freed* (James 2012c)—the activity of sex is constantly referred to as play. The three books and the cinematic adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Dir. Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015) are, throughout this article, considered to be primarily based around adult sexual game play.

Sex has long been employed as a topic in game studies (see: Suits 1978; Brown 2015), but there are relatively few studies on how sex toys are designed, manufactured and marketed—or indeed, used in sexual play. Notably, Clarissa Smith (2007) suggests that the consumption of accessories for sex depends on gender and class identities, and contributes to the construction of a particular form of hedonistic femininity. Lynn Comella (2004) provides another avenue of study, investigating the liberation movement in reference to women-owned sex toy

stores. Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank (2013) also examine women's narratives and subjective feelings about using sex toys. Although the aforementioned writings do not represent the conclusive range of literature in relation to sexual consumption, research material concerned with sex toys—especially in reference to playfulness as a mindset, or play as an activity—is relatively scarce. In this essay, I concentrate on the toys associated with the *Fifty Shades of Grey* book trilogy and the film. I will draw from theoretical writings from transdisciplinary sources, concentrating first and foremost on studies interested in sex-related products as commodities, but secondly building on ideas derived from game studies, play theories, toy research and online materials provided by companies selling erotic toys. Overall, I will investigate the contemporary material aspects of sexual play as a sub-phenomenon of the *toyification* megatrend.

'I exercise control': Rules for Benefit and Pleasure

Oh, so this is the game we're playing, Miss Steele?
(James 2012b: 480—481)

At the beginning of the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anastasia (Dakota Johnson) sees the black piano in the living room of Christian Grey's (Jamie Dornan) minimalist but lavish apartment in the Escala building; asking, 'Do you play?' When she understands that the playing of this musical instrument represents yet a further dimension of Mr. Grey's skillset, she mutters: 'Of course you do'. Later, when she encounters Christian playing a melancholic melody in the middle of the night after their first sexual act, she says, 'Everything you play is so sad'.² An underlying sadness may be the profound state of mind of the mysterious Mr. Grey, but not an emotion generally associated with one of the key themes of the novel trilogy and the film: play as a form of human behaviour.

However, in E.L. James's work, play and the things designed to be used *in* play come to have multiple meanings. Play is what Christian does for pleasure in his leisure time, playing with the piano, objects, Anastasia, and also his own body. Play is what manifests as an essential part of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia, as well as

in their relationship to objects. Play is on one hand a means to achieve goals. On the other hand, it is non-instrumental.

The uselessness and usefulness of play are constantly discussed in reference to both children and adults. Play is considered as frivolous, often contrasted to serious, productive work (Sutton-Smith 1997). Again, play is considered the work of children and although an *autotelic* (intrinsically motivated) activity, children are expected to build skills and become educated by toys. For adults, toys carry in them the possibility to escape everyday burdens and to enter the realms of fantasy and pleasure. According to toy designer Sato Hisao, toys are tools designed for happiness. Sex toys are commodities and leisure products that carry a function related to sexual stimulation, but on the other hand, they are also closely linked with the ideas of personal fantasies, health and quite possibly happiness³. As Meika Loe suggests, pleasure is personal and polymorphous (1999: 717).

For adults, questions of pleasure and happiness relate to time, the instruments and environments used for play, and the play partners interacted with. Moreover, pleasure and happiness often have to do with the potential goal-orientation and productivity of play. Some forms of play generate outcomes, and therefore, may contribute to the happiness of the player. Games, as goal-oriented play activities, often involve social play; relying on the following of rules, controlled play, and an expectation of outcomes that will be generated whilst playing. Games follow the idea of rule-based interaction, which requires commitment and concensuality of all players—a mutual agreement about the willingness to play. These dynamics are certainly evident in *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

“I’ll see you on Sunday. I’ll have the revised contract ready for you, and then we can really start to play.”

“Play?” Holy shit. My heart leaps into my mouth.

“I’d like to do a scene with you. But I won’t until you’ve signed, so I know you’re ready.”

(James 2012a: 278)

Although it is possible to consider the main expression of playfulness in *Fifty Shades of Grey*—namely, sex—as an autotelic activity and thus a free-form play

(which Roger Caillois [1961] terms *paidia*), it may well have goals and consequences that the players either strive towards or avoid. When referring to the playing of rule-bound games (or *ludus*, according to Callois [1961]), adult play is more accepted and celebrated. Adult play forms seem to be pre-planned rather than spontaneous, and heavily structured; that is, legitimate adult play seems to be predominantly *ludic* rather than *paedic* (Caillois 2001; Deterding 2014). In this way, sexuality may also be seen as a realm where the playing of ‘games’ happens.

In the film, Anastasia confesses: ‘Organized group activities are not really my thing’. Games, in essence, are precisely that; organised group activities, in which certain rules are applied, but where negotiations are possible depending on the type of game. Christian Grey’s entire life, in contrast to Anastasia’s seeming avoidance of ‘games’, seems like something of a meta-game featuring both labour and leisure, in which play takes centre. The ‘Playroom’ and toy collection, in the books and film, function as spatial and physical manifestations of erotic playfulness. The various ‘games’ such as the playful ‘business meeting’ at Christian’s office, and the multiple bondage sessions in the Playroom (as negotiated acts of play), function as evidence of a lifestyle governed by control. The joyous and careless free play in the Georgia skies flying a glider, as depicted in the film, contrast to Christian’s controlled, goal-oriented games in the Playroom.

Furthermore, Christian and Anastasia also exercise their competitive play drives by turning to games familiar from everyday life:

“And, of course, you’ve been in here.” Christian opens the door.

I spy the green baize of the billiard table.

“Shall we play?” I ask.

Christian smiles, surprised. “Okay. Have you played before?”

“A few times,” I lie, and he narrows his eyes, cocking his head to one side.

“You’re a hopeless liar, Anastasia. Either you’ve never played before or – “

I lick my lips. “Frightened of a little competition?”

(James 2012b: 237)

According to Bernard Suits (1978), in games, playing is more important than the outcome—reaching a goal; in terms of sex, the orgasm becomes an objective and therefore the importance of playing the game. For Katherine Frank, sex can be understood as an expression of love and commitment in the marriage, but as ‘play’ with other partners (2013: 66). In the latter case, this form of play usually involves rules, as illustrated in the relationship between Christian and Anastasia:

Christian: It’s fairly detailed. You would review it and we would negotiate what you are and are not willing to try (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2015)

The contract between Christian and Anastasia states: ‘The submissive will obey any instruction given by the dominant. She will do it eagerly and without hesitation’. The non-disclosure agreement between the lead characters of the film forms a non-negotiable set of rules, yet the actual contract between the Dominant and the Submissive is negotiated formally before it is signed during a business meeting at Grey Enterprises. Paralleling BDSM-related line of thought, the contract between Christian and Anastasia seems to strive to an agreement stressing safety, sanity and consensus⁴:

“I have rules, and I want you to comply with them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I shall reward you. If you don’t, I shall punish you, and you will learn,” he whispers.
(James 2012a: 100)

‘Like for your Xbox, or something?’: Room for Play and Foreplay

J. Tuomas Harviainen and Katherine Frank suggest that group sex is a playful, even game-like activity, particularly when carried out in the context of ‘lifestyle’ events (2015). In exploring the play aspect of ‘orgies’, they paint a picture of a highly stigmatised activity to which there are many hard (non-flexible) and soft (often-negotiated) rules. These ‘lifestyle’ events, according to Harviainen and Frank (2015), are carefully planned in advance so that during the event

free play may occur; and although the events tend to be very playful, spatial concerns are of high importance (Harviainen and Frank 2015). Christian Grey’s sex games also have a dedicated space for play: the Playroom. In this playscape, a safe terrain for experimental play, the mutually negotiated rules constitute what play scholar Johan Huizinga (1955) might term a special playground, or a magic circle of play.

But why are we looking at a playroom?
I am mystified.

“You want to play on your Xbox?” I ask.
He laughs loudly.

“No, Anastasia, no Xbox, no Playstation. Come.”
(James 2012a: 96)

The trailer for *Fifty Shades of Grey*⁵ includes a short introduction to a scene in which Christian unlocks the door to his Playroom, later to be referred to as ‘the red room of pain’ by Anastasia. Once opened, the pair step from the minimalism of Christian’s apartment into a room dedicated to BDSM practices; a room filled with curious furniture, undefinable artefacts and a drawer full of toys. Here, the notion of play has become distanced from its traditional connotations; the realms of play connected with fun, games and entertainment, for instance derived from consoles such as Xbox or Playstation. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, sex becomes a goal-oriented game, or a sport, in which sexual stamina and ‘physical pursuits’—as referred to by Christian when interviewed by Anastasia at the beginning of the film—are measured by the use of the equipment in the Playroom, and are rewarded by a feedback system as well as orgasmic pleasures.

Although toys, according to traditional understandings, represent playthings inviting free form play, there are many rules involved; particularly when considering toy play as a social and spatially organized practice. When toys are played with, rules are not rigid from the start, but negotiated in soft-terms. Toy play in physical spaces are often more institutionalised than play in the privacy of the home: there are limits, dictated by society, regarding where and when one may play as an adult.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey* there are certainly spatial boundaries for play, but rather than firmly

holding to the notion that ‘what happens in the Playroom, stays in the Playroom’, play also happens outside of this space. Game scholar Sebastian Deterding points out, ‘if public space heightens the exposure to others, private spaces lessen it. [...] adult play typically takes place in one’s home where one is literally shielded from the eyes and ears of potentially disapproving others’ (2014).

“Do you want to play this game?” he continues,
holding up the balls.
“You can always take them out if it’s too much.”
(James 2012b: 127)

On occasion, Anastasia and Christian leave the secretiveness and safety of the Playroom behind, opting instead for steamy foreplay in an elevator, or experimenting with ‘Ben Wa Balls’⁶ during a public outing (James 2012b). Sex toys are hence removed from an intimate realm, taken from ‘playrooms’ to public spheres. In this way, Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle as playground can also be applied to public spaces. When Anastasia takes her sex toy out in public in *Fifty Shades Darker* (James 2012b), the assumed perversity of playing with sex toys in public develops into playful, mischievous and pervasive play: the expected boundedness of play—the rules, regulations and attitudes about where sexual games involving toys may take place—are contested. With the Ben Wa Balls inserted inside her body, Anastasia and Christian’s play transcends the borders of the Playroom, when sexual games are taken to public spaces not commonly used for play.

Girls and Boys, with their Toys

Toys! Oh, I love, love, love this anticipation.
The drawer closes and my breathing spikes.
How can the sound of a drawer render me a
quivering mess?
It makes no sense
(James 2012c: 113)

In order to analyse the toyification of everyday life and the objects related to it, including sex toys, attention must be turned to the traditional realm of toy play. Although the transgenerational benefits of play

are recognised, it is difficult for many adults to admit a desire to engage in play. Whereas play is considered perhaps problematic in many adult lives, the concept of adult toy play carries with it even more complexities. ‘Play’ and ‘toy’, in quotation marks, are as far as many dare to go when referring to adults and their toy-related activities.

Thomas Power categorises play in locomotor play, solitary object, social object/pretend, play fighting, and parent-child (Power 2000). Paralleling the play type of ‘playing with our bodies’ recognised by Power—or *locomotor play*—the sexual games in *Fifty Shades* not only use the human body as a ‘plaything’, but also involve *object play* in the sense that a variety of toys are used in the sexual act to heighten the level of sensual stimuli. It is notable that sex toys are used both in solo sex and sexual activities involving couples, and in groups of people. In James’s work the actual sex toys are always employed in play scenarios involving both (and only) main characters, Christian and Anastasia. Furthermore, it is possible to see Anastasia become a human plaything to serve Christian—the master of his own universe,⁷ who knows his toy collection and dictates the rules of how to play with them. The instruments of the Playroom constitute a combination of furnishings; a drawer full of toys and hardware store items such as rope, tape and cable tie. The tools and instruments used in the activity of play have, on the other hand, a dual position. Outside of the Playroom, the concept of ‘toy’ comes to have other meanings—ones related to the shared experiences of enjoyment in relation to unstructured, *free play*.

The playthings of Christian’s Playroom drawer—erotic toys—are used in sex acts, but the other possessions that are depicted as his objects of desire, such as technological gadgets, entertainment equipment and vehicles, have a function outside of play. Even though they can be understood as potentially playful instruments, they are in fact objects that have not been designed to purely serve the purposes of play; they are toys primarily when they act as play aids. In accordance with the popular ‘toys for boys’ rhetoric, Christian’s playthings outside of the bordered and intimate Playroom space are larger in scale and used for entertainment in public.

Anastasia: Which one of them is yours?

Christian: All of them.

(*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2015)

The multiple sport cars in Christian's garage at his apartment building, the helicopter Charlie Tango, or the jet ski used during a Mediterranean honeymoon, are all examples of vehicles affording play; but they are also items of prestige used by Christian to keep up the image of a wealthy lifestyle, in which one may enter the magic circle of play at all times. Christian's gifts to Anastasia, such as an iPod and a car, to name but a few, represent for the future Mrs. Grey not only prizes for playing well in the Playroom, but also patronising and controlling devices through which accessibility to her (as a playmate) may be maintained at all times. On the other hand, Anastasia's gifts to Christian—a miniature helicopter running on solar power, and a Nikon camera—are toys produced for the sake of entertainment, fantasy and self-realisation during leisure; they are toys that promote 'playful play' (Bateson and Martin 2013). In this way, Anastasia's gifts differ from Christian's toys in the Playroom and outside of it; the latter of which, as investments, are expected to bring with their use goal-oriented results and not necessarily solely playful experiences.

As B. Lönnqvist (1991) points out, differentiating 'real' toys from other artefacts is difficult as many objects have a double meaning. For example, dolls function both as ritual objects connected with religious purposes, and as props in children's play (Lönnqvist 1991: 18–19). In Sutton-Smith's work, this double meaning correlates to 'the ambiguity of the referent'—for instance, the question of *is that an object or a toy?* (Sutton-Smith 1997: 2). In the age of the ludic turn, toys take many forms. In particular, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between sex toys and art objects, or sex toys and toyish characters. In James's work, besides the equipment of the Playroom, the shades of toys become further enriched as Christian and Anastasia employ toys of the more traditional style in their relationship. When sex toys and 'boys toys' serve the fulfilment of sexual desires either directly or indirectly, toys of the more traditional kind represent comparatively more

nostalgic products delivering non-erotic, emotional and even childish pleasures related to play:

"Charlie Tango," I whisper.

He grins. The box contains a small wooden helicopter with a large, solar-powered rotor blade. He opens it up. "Solar powered," he murmurs. "Wow." And before I know it he's sitting on the bed assembling it. It snaps together quickly, and Christian holds it up in the palm of his hand. A blue wooden helicopter. He looks up at me and gives me his glorious, all-American-boy smile, then heads to the window so that the little helicopter is bathed in sunlight and the rotor starts to spin.

(James 2012b: 480–481)

One of the ways to argue for the play value of a designed plaything is to look at its scale of *playability*. A good toy is considered to have (potential) play value, which actualises when the toy is 'brought into life' in play. All of the toys presented in *Fifty Shades of Grey* are playable, but while Christian's toys and his gifts to Anastasia seem to be playable in functional terms, Anastasia's toy purchases for Christian have meanings beyond functionality. Besides their apparent play value, these objects are memory aids referring to romantic coupledness, and acting as containers for emotion. At the end of the film, Anastasia has left a DG 1001S model glider on Christian's table with a note saying: 'This reminded me of a happy time. Ana'.

'Vibrators ok. Dildos, fine': Toyification of Sex

Christian: It's called the flogger.

Anastasia: You punish me? Like you'd use this stuff on me?

Christian: Yes.

Anastasia: Whipped and tortured in your Red Room of Pain.

Christian: That room is much more about pleasure. I promise you.

(*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2015)

Play scholar Miguel Sicart calls out a need for objects that are playful (2014). Although *Fifty Shades* does not necessarily present the objects in Christian's

Playroom as playful, they are still referred to as things meant for play. Sex toys are often referred to in this way, as adult toys. Even though the toys in *Fifty Shades* do not always communicate playfulness in terms of colour or humorous appearances, they are curious objects used as tools and instruments in the Playroom, and sometimes outside of it.

British retailer Boots sells Durex products that are advertised with the slogan 'Get ready for playtime'. The marketing slogan indicates that sex toys and related products such as lubricants bring with them a promise of play. 'Only in the last decade or so [...] people have finally started to chill out and consider toys part of a healthy sex life', note Emma Taylor and Lorelei Sharkey (2006). Adult toys, also known under the labels erotic and sex toys, have also been called novelties. The definition according to Oxford English Dictionary is: 'Something new, not previously experienced, unusual, or unfamiliar; a novel thing' (OED 2015). Taylor and Sharkey suggest that the label 'novelty' is 'a legal term for products not intended for serious use' (2006: 142). Also in more traditional toy cultures the notion of novelty prevails, referring mostly to gag toys. Still, fun and awe are what most of us seek in toys, and any new ones are expected to bring with them a promise of play.

Does the Submissive consent to the use of:

- * Vibrators
- * Dildos
- * Butt plugs
- * Other vaginal/anal toys

Part of 'Appendix 3' in the contract between
Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele
(James 2012a: 173-174)

Coiffed, trained and suppressed by given rules, Anastasia appears to be the perfect sexual toy for Christian Grey; but the play scenarios in *Fifty Shades* also make the reader/audience aware of a drawer full of 'intimate products'. The toy drawer in the Playroom can also be regarded as a toolbox of sorts, a compilation of 'boys' toys' that can be utilised in sensory play involving a playmate. The use of these tools, when harnessed in this type of play, also implies motivations and intentions related to control and governing of not only the objects of play, but also the subject of play. Rather than providers of autoerotic pleasures

for women, the sex toys employed in James's novels and in the film seem to cater to the needs of the dominant, in this case Christian. For instance, Anastasia meets Christian for a 'business meeting' that, despite its playfulness, also enables Anastasia to decide certain limits in relation to their use of sex toys:

Anastasia: The use of sex toys ok. Vibrators ok.
Dildos, fine. Genital clips, absolutely not.
(*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2015)

Before the vibrator became a novelty item, it was used in health care. In 1869, American George Taylor invented the 'Manipulator', a steam-powered, coal-fired vibrator. The electromechanical vibrator invented later by London physician Joseph Mortimer Granville and manufactured by the British firm Weiss in the 1880s proved more popular. By the late 1920s, vibrators had become home appliances before they disappeared from the popular press to re-enter again in the 1970s, with the launch of Hitachi's vibrator for women, the 'Magic Wand' (Davis and Gerl 2014). A vibrator for men was launched in 1994, when the 'Fleshlight' entered the marketplace (Dangerfield 2013). As Loe notes, the market for sex toys has been rapidly expanding since the 1990s (1999: 720).

In the 2010s sex toys once again entered a situation in which their use is associated with both a healthy sexual well-being and on the other hand to the 'pornographication of culture' (McNair in Smith 2007: 171). In 2009, Debra Herbenick et al. reported that data from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey indicated only 2% of women had bought a vibrator in the last year (Herbenick et al. 2009). The *Daily Mail* reported in 2012 that while the UK sex toy business was now worth £250 million a year, global sales of erotic accessories would set to rise to £400 million. Furthermore, women-owned sex shops have contributed to a change in the market place's image. According to Amber Martin (2014), erotic boutiques selling designer sex toys tend to target the cosmopolitan, and thus a consumer elite. These shops can be found in shopping precincts that attract heterosexual couples and single females.

As Taylor and Sharkey note (2006), the sex toys industry had in the last decade turned from

a ‘push’ market to a ‘pull market. This means that a previously male-driven industry, in which men dominated positions in companies marketing and distributing play objects for adults, has over the past few years answered the call of female consumers. Today, especially in the UK and US, adult toy stores range between shops selling gimmicky sex items (Ann Summers) to ‘boutique-style stores’ (such as Myla). In between are retail outlets which, besides sex toys, also offer workshops relating to sexual well-being (for instance, Good Vibrations, the first woman-owned sex shop in the US).

Fifty Shades of Grey represents fantasy fiction written by a woman and consumed by women all over the Western world. It is no wonder that the sex toy market seeks ways to design, offer and seduce women with products and strategies that cater for the playfulness of the contemporary (wo)man—homo ludens of this day. The change in the market has brought more playfulness to erotic toys, as the official licensed ‘Fifty Shades of Grey Charlie Tango Classic Vibrator; illustrates (Figure 2). In 2012, online sex toy retailer Lovehoney marketed an official range of *Fifty Shades of Grey* sex toys inspired and approved by James (Martin 2013).

The official look of the licensed products carry with them a ‘classy’ appearance, unfamiliar to most sex toys marketed in the 1970s to 1990s. The aesthetics of erotic artefacts has indeed undergone a transformation from ‘trashy’ to ‘tasteful’. Smith draws connections between consumption, taste and discourses of female sexual self-discovery (2007: 168); she writes, ‘The rise of designer sex shops such as Coco de Mer and Myla (in the U.K.) indicate a “pushing up” of sex, where the efficacy of a toy is perhaps less important than having a designer object to display to friends’ (2007: 167). It is interesting to note how Smith brings up the notion of price as a point differentiating traditional sex industry toys, and these new, clearly more consciously ‘designed’ artefacts (Smith 2007). When elevated to the category of lifestyle products rather than only objects promising orgasms, there is a correlative change in price. In other words, the more ‘classy’ sex toy brands operate in a market of exclusion, where only individuals able to invest more in the sexy lifestyle can enjoy the pros



Figure 2: The ‘Fifty Shades of Grey Charlie Tango Classic Vibrator’ demonstrates a classy look and employs the aesthetic familiar from the trilogy. Image courtesy of Groupon, 2015.

of well-thought design and better quality materials, forms and functionality. Of course, in Christian Grey’s world, price would not be an issue.

Nevertheless, the retail market for sex toys is still as varied as its products and users, particularly when considering that a sex toy is a material object with a variety of functional. As Comella points out, sex toys serve multiple purposes and uses when employed by their players, just like any other types of toys:

Perhaps not surprisingly, sex toys represent different things to different people; they allow many people to exercise greater control over their orgasms, explore their fantasies, satisfy a sexual curiosity, spice up a relationship, or experiment with different gender roles and performances. For others, sex toys might help to improve sexual confidence, or ease the sting of a breakup
(Comella 2004: 275-276).

The rise of high-end toys may also have to do with the fact that some couples see sex toys as an investment in their love life. For example, according to

Craig L. Davis and Ellen J. Gerl (2014), during the past 15 years vibrator use has entered the mainstream due to the product's popular acceptance and mass market availability. Today, there are vibrators intended to be used by couples. Rachel Maines suggests that the vibrator 'has taken a totemic quality in American culture' (1999: 122). My assumption is that the popularity of sex toys has also risen not only due to 'a discourse [...] enabling the conversion of erotic fiction into erotic reality' (Martin 2013), but also because retail stores of the brick-and-mortar type are more approachable due to the simplest things, for instance the name of the store. Names such as Babeland, Pleasure Chest, Good Vibrations and Mister Sister are comparatively more welcoming than shops leaning on 'cheap' or dated aesthetics that seem pornographic to customers.

The toyish dimensions of Christian Grey's Playroom manifest in a collection of sex toys neatly organised in a drawer. The props for play and foreplay are visible, as the 'materials' for sexual play are not limited to actual toys, but are also in the very furnishings of the room. Although vibrators are mainly used as masturbatory aids and thus for solitary play, they are increasingly used by couples, including Christian and Anastasia. Christian has curated a collection, which allows his love interests to claim ownership of some individual play objects:

I frown. "You buy new, er...toys...for each submissive?"
"Some things. Yes."
"Butt plugs?"
"Yes."

(James 2012b: 389)

Sex toys are consumer objects at the centre of seduction. Based on brands known from transmedia-related phenomena such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, independently launched products ('Rabbit Habit'), or brand names ('Toyfriend'), they seduce the consumer (or, player) into acquiring a fantasy of play when they buy the product. Second, they aim to actualise the potential of the toy to fulfil its promises of an exciting and satisfying play session, with the further possibility of seducing a partner when putting the toy into play. Before *Fifty Shades*, sex toys made significant

appearances in popular televised narratives such as *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004). The infamous 'Rabbit Habit' vibrator, as featured in *Sex and the City*, carries an unintimidating look and a funny name. Charlotte (Kristin Davis) says: "Oh, I thought it would be all scary and weird, but it isn't. It's... it's pink! [...] The little bunny! His little face!" ('Turtle and the Hare', 1998; see also: Comella 2004). The clever naming of sex toys, for instance in the case of 'Rabbit Habit', is common practice not only among the producers of these playthings, but also amongst users. Regarding female use of sex toys, Fahs & Swank (2013) found that several women anthropomorphised their toys by naming them, referring to them as a 'substitute' for a real person, or imagining a relationship with their (male) sex toys. Humour seems to play an important part in the naming of erotic toys, as an excerpt from *Fifty Shades of Grey* illustrates:

"Eggs?" I'm alarmed.
"Not real eggs." He laughs loudly, shaking his head. I purse my lips at him.
"I'm glad you find me funny." I can't keep my injured feelings of my voice.
He stops laughing.
"I apologize. Miss Steele, I'm sorry," he says, trying to look contrite, but his eyes are still dancing with humor. "Any problem with toys?"
"No." I snap.
"Anastasia," he cajoles. "I am sorry. Believe me. I don't mean to laugh. I've never had this conversation in so much detail. You're just so inexperienced. I'm sorry."
(James 2012a: 269)

In sum, contemporary sex toys are curious objects to be explored viscerally and through manipulation: besides their brand names, moving away from gimmicky sex toys into the area of lifestyle products and visually pleasing devices extends the idea of normalisation of sex toys to the 'beautification of them'. Even if a sex toy would not carry a resemblance to a phallus, its name may have a tongue-in-cheek reference to a possible, anthropomorphised partner, as is the case with the Toyfriend vibrator⁹.

Attwood states that web-based sex businesses today try to 'distance sexual products from the

representation of sex as “dirty” (Attwood 2005: 403). According to Taylor and Sharkey (2006), some of the most popular sex toys do not carry a resemblance to a penis. A helpful comment made by store owner Devioune Mayim-Daviau of the Mister Sister store in Providence, Rhode Island, supports this: ‘Women who don’t want to have something that resembles a penis buy this [cutified vibrator] instead’¹⁰. As a sculptural piece, a glass dildo may for instance pass for an art object when put on display. Cutification of vibrators is a sub-phenomenon of the ‘beautification of adult toys’ (Cuni in Fairs 2013). Lelo, a Swedish high-end sex toy brand, represents one of the brands interested in remodeling the sex toy scene, perhaps in a direction suggested by Martin: ‘female friendly, fashionable, exciting and safe as opposed to extreme, marginalized and dangerous’ (Martin 2013). For Smith, ‘These toys exploit the qualities new materials and technologies’ (2007: 147). In this way, sex toys follow design thinking used in other contemporary toys, which are known to exploit the latest in term of material innovations and manufacturing techniques.

The current trend of increasingly ‘cutified’ sex toys may lead to discrepancies between character toys for all ages, and toys that might be considered to have some ‘character’. Forms, colouring and texture of current sex toys may represent exactly the same colour schemes as contemporary designer toys, such as action figures. Furthermore, sometimes the sex toys of today come very close to the aesthetic of character toys with a face, as is the case with the ‘Hello Kitty’ vibrator. In 1997, toy company Genyo licensed the Hello Kitty brand to develop a line of toys. One of them was a vibrating shoulder massager that became later a regular feature in Japanese adult videos (Taylor and Sharkey 2006: 100-101). Lynn Comella, writer of a doctoral thesis exploring women-owned sex toy stores, recalls her encounter with a ‘Mickey Mouse’ vibrator.¹¹ Packaging of sex toys once considered sleazy have gained a more significant role in communicating the functions and play value of these products, largely due to the cutification trend. Moreover, what applies to more traditional toys is also true of sex toys: the latter can be explored outside of their packaging in store, which may encourage impulse purchases. Whereas the visual and textual

branding of the toy may invite to fantasies about its use, it is the feel of the object that gives a stronger signal about its play value (Lynn 2004: 16).

Conclusions: Shades of the Future

Remember, whoever dies
with the most sex toys wins!
(Taylor and Sharkey 2006: 11)

After the launch of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, the Consumer Product Safety Commission in the United States reported a rise in sex toy related accidents on the US market (see: Ingraham 2015). This indicates that the books may have significantly affected the growth of interest in using play ‘materials’ in sexual activities.

The future of toyification will hold even more opportunities to imagine and produce cutting-edge erotic accessories, such as 3D printed sex toys (see: Fair 2013). New designs present both risks and possibilities. New technologies such as 3D printing, for instance, are not yet able to cater for safety in terms of the washability and porousness of the printings. However, as the novelty slowly fades away from the adult toy market, it will give rise to new entrepreneurs interested in developing even more user-friendly sex toys and environments to purchase them from, as well as to provide the marketplace with more accurate knowledge about how to evaluate the risks of sex toy use and to advise more effectively about safety.

To conclude, it seems fitting to argue that the fifty (and even more) shades of toys currently available on the market stand as proof for a more casual attitude towards adult play with toys. The toyification of sex has led to a situation in which it is more accepted that mature audiences may acquire, bond with and experience pleasures with sex toys, either solitarily or socially. Also, in the process the fiction of *Fifty Shades* has, to some degree, become adapted into reality. In more critical terms, this development seems to suggest that either solitary sex, or that between couples/groups, is increasingly more dependent on the use of artefacts (and of technology) promising excitement and sexual stimuli.

What position has E.L. James's erotic trilogy and Sam Taylor-Johnson's film in the ludic developments discussed in this essay? To my mind, as a phenomenon *Fifty Shades of Grey* has affected how erotic pleasure can be embraced by using not only dedicated spaces for play, but also play aids. People may be more experimental in their explorations of sexuality; perhaps taking a more casual and playful stance towards 'sex games', or whatever else might occur in the Playrooms of adults. With regard to the critique that has been presented towards the literary work of James, particularly the themes of male dominance and female submission, there may be an alternative way of reading the phenomenon.

Due to the popularity of the original novel trilogy and the newly released cinematic adaptation, there may now amongst women be a more openly profound interest in bringing play(fulness) into the bedroom by introducing a toy drawer and engaging in the activity of play. Alternatively, these texts may inspire their audience to rethink the power-relations and the employment of rules in sex games of their own. Overall, as I have demonstrated throughout this article, play—both in the playing of games and with toys (artefactual and human)—is a key theme in the relationship between Anastasia and Christian. In this way, the popular texts of *Fifty Shades* parallel the idea of the ludic nature of our times. I argue that, in the end, it is not the *Fifty Shades of Grey* branded sex toys and accessories that are of primary importance, but the fact that the books and the film have paved the way for a generally more accepting, leisurely and playful take on products that promise fulfilment of erotic fantasies. Perhaps *Fifty Shades* has worked to foreground an element that has been neglected, for the most part, in the commercialisation of ideas surrounding bodily play at adult age: Fun.

While the audience of *Fifty Shades of Grey* may have become intrigued by the possibility of acquiring new playthings, or perhaps in exploring sexuality by turning to new forms of play, Christian's Playroom fades to the background little by little as the plot evolves. In *Fifty Shades Freed* (James 2012c), the life of Mr. and Mrs. Grey takes a new turn when they become parents. Here, James adjusts the tone of the once heated toy story by returning to the romantic notion of a traditional plaything being set up for a

two-year old, but with the father of the child dreaming of playing with the toy train himself. The adult toys of *Fifty Shades*, at this juncture, seem to lose some of their meaning to Christian when given the opportunity to return to playing with a traditional children's toy:

Christian has finished setting up the wooden train set he bought Teddy for his birthday. He's had Barney at the office convert two of the little engines to run on solar power like the helicopter I gave Christian a few years ago. Christian seems anxious for the sun to rise. I suspect that's because he wants to play with the train himself. The layout covers most of the stone floor of our outdoor room. Tomorrow we will have a family party for Ted (James 2012c: 547).

Notes

¹ *The Economist* blogger Schumpeter reports that 'In Japan over 20-year-olds made up 23% of total sales in 2011. But only 3.5% of American toy buyers were buying for themselves last year. There is untapped potential here' (2014).

² Audio-visually, the use of bondage and impact toys are portrayed in the film in sensual and eroticised ways: the toy treasures of the red room of pain, such as rope and whips, are used by Christian on Ana while accompanied by a soundtrack of slowly accelerating, seductive rhythms and vocals by Beyoncé. Hence, not everything being 'played' in the film is melancholic or sad. In general, it must be noted that most of the songs featured in the film are performed by contemporary female artists making the soundtrack yet another extension to the cornucopia of *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchises alluring (female) consumers.

³ From the 2011 'Tools for happiness[s]' toy exhibition at the Rags for Apps conference, Shenkar College, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁴ According to Tamar Kay, the phrase 'Safe, Sane and Consensual' (later featured in a book title by Darren Langridge and Meg Barker in 2007) can be understood as follows: safe means 'scenes' without the risk for injuries and sexually transmitted diseases and being well educated about techniques; sane implies self-control and responsibility; and finally,

consensual means that ‘everything that happens in a scene must be acceptable to all concerned’ (Kay 1995).

⁵ The official theatrical trailer for *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/SfZWFDsoLxA>.

⁶ *Fifty Shades of Grey* branding also features on a line of Ben Wa Balls; see: <http://www.nicennaughty.co.uk/fifty-shades-of-grey-delicious-pleasure-silicone-ben-wa-balls.html>.

⁷ The phrase ‘master of his own universe’ also refers to the original *Twilight Saga* fanfiction upon which *Fifty Shades of Grey* is based: *Master of the Universe*, written by E.L. James in 2009 under the pseudonym ‘Snowqueens Icedragon’.

⁸ On the other hand, Fahs and Swank (2013) argue that queer women can use sex toys more easily for fun, silliness, exploration, play and subversion of normative scripts, because they do not experience the competition on men that heterosexual women may do.

⁹ See: <http://toyfriend.us/>.

¹⁰ Personal communication (24 April, 2015 at Mister Sister store in Providence, RI, USA).

¹¹ “[A] Japanese company was producing a pocket rocket style vibrator in the shape of Mickey Mouse’s four fingered, white-gloved hand. I loved the symbolic transgressions of using a wholesome Disney character as inspiration for a vibrator design, and delighted in making a sign to accompany the display that said: “Here’s your chance to have Disney down your pants!” (Lynn 2004: 8).

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