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The Work of Play at American Girl Place

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For a number of years, my colleagues and I have inhabited American Girl Place in Chicago, a host of other public venues to which the ceaseless procession of trademarked red shopping bags drew us, and the intimate play spaces of children's rooms, parsing our findings across genres of publication in an effort to understand the brand.[1] The cover photo documents one of many revelatory incidents we captured ethnographically.

Comfortably seated in a sales area themed as a library—such other micromerchandised areas as the Café, Theatre, Museum, Salon, and Photo Studio host other emplacing tableaux—and flanked by the ethnically diverse yet thematically unified chronicles of American Girls of yore, a child steeped in conversation with her grandmother illustrates a point by tapping an unpurchased volume. This image of an intergenerational exchange mediated by the brand can be found on the SPQ website, www.asanet.org/spq. Nestled into the child is a surfer-girl doll from the brand's contemporary line, with (and as is often the case, to) whom the child had just been reading yet another unpurchased book. The dramatic juxtaposition of historical eras, with many of which the grandmother has had either direct or proximate experience, further validates and makes relevant the values her own life encompasses in the eyes of her granddaughter. The nesting of teaching moments captured in the photograph is integral to the store's appeal.

Grandmothers are curators, conservators, and concelebrants of a heroic femininity promoted by the brand. They (are seen to) embody the traits of integrity, perseverance, fidelity, and wisdom enshrined in the brand canon, and are devoted to the inculcation of these virtues into their granddaughters. They are the distaff drill sergeants who, through life example and family narrative, train their charges to improvise, adapt, and overcome in engagement with the precarious landscape of contemporary girlhood. Through practical and ritual activity, grandmothers help insure the successful reproduction of domestic culture, marrying individual initiative with communal commitment. Whether standing before the museumlike vitrines that portray the American dwelling from aboriginal times through the era of the Great Depression, or the product display cases that brim with the historical materiel of American home life, or conversing during High Tea in the Café or intermission at the Revue, grandmothers discourse upon the continuities and abruptions of the quotidian in ways that can captivate young girls, properly primed.

The flagship store is a 35,000 square foot, three-story experiential retail monument to the preteenage female, highlighting the efforts of those caretakers supervising her coming of age. The brand generates over four hundred million dollars per year for its owner, Mattel, who bought the property from founder Pleasant Rowland in 1998 for about seven hundred million dollars. The brand comprises lines of historical and contemporary eighteen-inch dolls and accessories, doll lines that reach segments immediately adjacent to the primary target, books devoted both to developing the personae of the historical dolls in sociocultural perspective and to contemporary developmental issues of self-care facing young girls, and experiential offerings in-store that impart additional value to the brand. The brand has established flagships in New York and Los Angeles as well, and is currently growing by creating smaller boutiques in existing retail centers.

[1] Our ethnographic analyses of the site and the brand can be found in the sources listed in the references section.

Products and their presentation at American Girl Place become projective fields for the embodiment of fantasy and ideology. The provision of merchandise as conversational props and the homey design of sales floors to encourage play within the store are keys to the brand's presence. The cover image captures this playful ambience. A stylishly dressed girl has positioned one historical doll to view the dioramic display case of another, while she grooms yet a third. A mother lounges on a nearby sociable, an S-shaped sofa that further encourages intimate interaction. The omnipresent red shopping bags are frequently repurposed as carry-alls, and children often bring previously purchased dolls and accessories along on repeat visits, making new playmates and treating the store much like home.

The palpable female "buzz" our informants attribute to the store is perhaps nowhere more strongly felt than in the Salon. Image 1 suggests something of the social significance of grooming rituals. Dolls are brought to the salon to have their hair styled, and often, more properly, repaired, after having been inexpertly if enthusiastically groomed at home. Young owners and their female kin draw around as dolls are perched in swivel chairs and coiffed by stylists, who, amidst great banter, must diplomatically incorporate and deflect suggestions from these sororal groups as the dolls are refreshed. Sometimes a badly damaged doll must be referred to the Hospital for corrective treatment. Other times, a doll is refused service if it is discovered to be an impostor, that is, another brand or knockoff. The former event can be an occasion of great relief, the latter of deep disappointment and embarrassment. As is the case with its real-world counterpart, the Salon is a staging ground for storytelling. Here, the story may begin with a humorous discussion of the reason for the visit, but it quickly escalates and diverges into a telling of family stories, often across the generations, with mothers and grandmothers sharing reminiscences, and daughters and granddaughters eliciting family history. Unrelated bystanders and adjacent customers are drawn into these conversations, becoming momentary fictive kin as they share stories and insights of their own.

Managers of the American Girl brand proclaim themselves to be in the business of creating memories, of setting the stage for an ephemeral event that can be encoded in a souvenir, and recovered mnemonically, in contemplation, through play. Image 2 illustrates the way in which consumers have extended this practice of memory creation. Several generations of kith and kin assemble as an extended family before the entrance of the store, posing with dolls, in order to be photographed and videotaped to commemorate their collective visit for posterity. Posing with purchases is an almost obligatory ritual, and visits are commonly documented extensively. (In fact, since the sidewalk and curb are colonized by male relatives and represent the only masculine space (with the exception of a tiny top floor bathroom) associated with the store, disenfranchised menfolk must sometimes be displaced to accommodate the ceremonial snapshot). These images are not simply archived and reviewed at home. It is not unusual to find consumers bearing scrapbooked accounts or digital photo files of previous shopping trips on a current visit, as a kind of starter dough for continual narrative nourishment. Nor is it uncommon for a shopping unit to be composed of grandmother, mother, daughter, granddaughter, doll, and doll's doll, each dressed in identical historical costume, or for that group to become a photo opportunity for others. As social scientists strive to understand the role of material culture in everyday life, the holistic nature of the brand becomes increasingly apparent. Brands facilitate social relations as often as they mask them. In the case of American Girl, conservative and progressive values are intertwined in transmission, as consumers both accommodate and resist managerial intention. If the brand is a beneficiary of middle-class consumers trading up, it also speaks to consumers of more modest means. The costliness of merchandise and the gentility of

Image 1. Grooming Ritual

some venues that abut the chronicles and tableaux of heroines stratified by income, ethnicity, and other historical variables virtually ensure among patrons (as well as the brand's detractors) a discussion of the causes and consequences of social class. The markers of privilege reinforced in acquisition can be challenged in use. While children are taught the value of the object along with the values of its referent, in play, cultural capital is as often erased as embraced. This might well be the case with other class-

Image 2. Memory Creation

conscious brand offerings, whether Homies, Flavas, or Bratz.

Whether retail theatre is appropriated by consumers eager to dramatize idiosyncratic family values, or by activists hoping to subvert the perceived politics of the corporation, the brand is mobilized and its aura extended. The contrasting model of femininity embodied in Mattel's other iconic property—Barbie—engenders ambivalence in consumers, and the firm's acquisition of American Girl has produced an anxious undercurrent among mothers and grandmothers, who are alert to the faint stirrings of incipient Barbification of their beloved dolls. If the act of acquisition is not exalted, they believe, it need not result in the shaping of an acquisitive child. If the cultural-historical meaning embedded in an artifact can be recovered and deployed in personal narrative, they believe, the purchase serves constructive ends. The irony behind their compartmentalized judgment is not entirely lost to them. And still, in our perilous present economy, sales figures demonstrate that Barbie is faltering, while American Girl continues to grow.

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