



PLAYING WITH HISTORY: TECHNOLOGY, TOYS, AND THE MATERIAL TURN

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Date: Wednesday, April 24, 2019

Time: 2.15-3.30 p.m.:

Venue: Building 1461, room 516

Excavating children's history shares many features with the work of cultural historians more broadly. Historians of the popular, everyday, or trivial may encounter archival omissions and silences, seeking primary materials not always considered "worthy" of historical preservation. Practitioners may also face obstacles in finding and interpreting materials that may have been archived or classified in ways that resist readings in cultural or popular terms. Yet such work is simultaneously energized by the playful possibilities inherent in the project of assembling disparate sources and drawing on incomplete records. The turn to material culture analysis offers practical approaches for exploring popular or cultural history that may be more difficult to trace through textual materials. Likewise, examining material artifacts provides possibilities to think about things across and outside of conventional categories. One area in which this is particularly true is in the study of historical toys—objects that are variously categorized as art objects, technologies, and diversions. Based on archival research on nineteenth-century optical toys conducted at institutions in the US, UK, and Italy, this talk will explore some practical and philosophical opportunities and limitations associated with material culture analysis. It will explore questions such as: What distinct possibilities does material culture analysis afford for addressing gaps in the historical record? How do material sources lend themselves to critical reclassification? To what extent might we apply the "playful" insights gleaned from the historical study of toys to cultural history more generally? Drawing on key theoretical texts and artifactual examples, the talk will highlight both challenges faced in the research process and the productive possibilities of studying objects.

The Seminar is organized by the Research Program in History