

Giving children the wrong (or not enough) toys may doom a society

Survival is a case of child's play

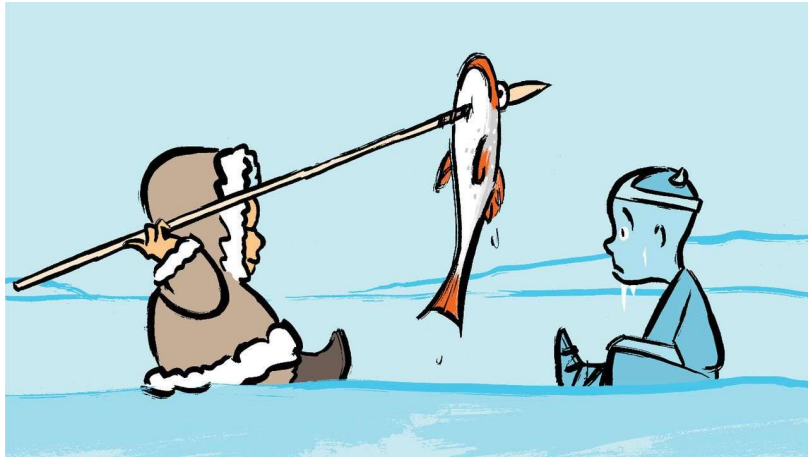


Illustration: Nishant Choksi

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GIVERS OF EDUCATIONAL gifts, rejoice: despite the eye-rolls you may receive on [Christmas morning](#), you are part of a long and valuable tradition. In cultures around the world, toys have been used to teach children what they need to know about the society they live in. When the toys teach the right skills, the children are prepared for adulthood and thrive. When they do not, calamity beckons.

And how. New work led by Mathilde Meyer, a PhD student at Aarhus University in Denmark, and Felix Riede, her supervisor, reveals that giving the wrong toys probably played an important part in dooming the Norse settlers who came to Greenland from Iceland in 985.

Greenland was mostly covered in ice when the Norse made the journey, save for a thin strip of fertile land along the coastline where they could farm. The settlers flourished for a few hundred years but, as the world entered a cold period (known as the Little Ice Age) in 1300, records show that they started to struggle. Summers became drier, temperatures dropped and storms strengthened. By 1400 the Norse were forced to abandon the settlements. Even so, the island remained inhabited: the Inuit people of northern Alaska arrived on Greenland in 1000 and endured long after the Norse gave up.

Why the Inuit survived while the Norse did not has baffled archaeologists for decades. One idea was that the Norse did not eat more seafood (as the Inuit did) when farming conditions deteriorated. But this is not backed by evidence. Isotope studies of Norse teeth show that they were turning to the ocean for food. Archaeologists agree that the Inuits adapted successfully while the Norse did not, but nobody knows why.

To try to answer that question, Ms Meyer and Dr Riede looked at as many toys as they could find that had once been played with by the children of either culture. The Norse settlements yielded 72. The Inuit settlements, located in similar environmental conditions, yielded 2,397. For the researchers, this staggering difference implies that the Inuit gave their children more toys than the Norse did.

Ms Meyer and Dr Riede then assigned each toy to one of five categories. These included toys of weapons (including harpoons, arrows and swords), tools (cooking pots, lamps and saws), forms of transport (boats and sledges), for social play (dolls and figurines) and for skill play (tops and balls). They also determined approximate times for when the toys were made, either between 1000 and 1200 or 1200 and 1400.

The categorisation process revealed that the Inuit children not only had more toys available to them, but that these toys were more diverse. For example, though the Norse children had access to only toy arrows, axes and swords, the Inuit children also had toy bows, crossbows, darts, harpoons, harpoon mountings, lances and much more. Most important, Ms Meyer and Dr Riede found that the differences in the number and diversity of toys grew dramatically over time.

Not just fun and games

They report in the *European Journal of Archaeology* that, although eight social-play toys were found among the Norse settlements and 23 social-play toys were found among the Inuit settlements between 1000 and 1200, over the next 200 years the gap grew to 11 social-play toys for the Norse and 158 social-play toys for the Inuit.

A similar trend held for all the other categories of toy. As the years went by, toys associated with hunting at sea (a category including harpoons as well as figurines of seals and fish) became more common among the Inuit, but the Norse continued to give their children figurines of horses and birds. In essence, say the researchers, the Norse were adapting their lives to their new environment but continuing to gift old-fashioned toys.

Though the lack of toys may indicate that Norse society was less creative from the start, the researchers argue that their tendency to give irrelevant toys compounded any initial lack of creativity and ultimately sabotaged their survival. In contrast, the Inuits' preference for diverse and relevant toys paved the way for their children to be more innovative and adaptive. A parable for parents if ever there was one. ■