Barbie in Borderless Worlds?
A Case Study

In a train that rattles and swings up out of the underground a little girl stares out the window at the glittering towers and cries to her mother, 'We're here, we're here!'.

Emma is overwhelmed with excitement. She twists her red hair-ribbons between her fingers and leans with fondness and pleasure into the curve of her mother's body. Everything about today is special and wonderful. This is a school day, but she isn't at school. It's not Christmas or her birthday, but she is going to the city to buy a present – a doll – a Barbie doll. And, best of all, she is with her mother. Just the two of them together, for a whole day, in the city, buying a Barbie.

Emma's mother, Tess, feels the warmth and pleasure of her daughter beside her and smiles. It has been so long since she has had time like this. Since David lost his job. Since she started work at DataFlow. Since Grandma came to live with them. There has been so little time and so little money and she has been so tired. She is still tired, but at least this is one small day and she can manage one small treat. If Emma wants a Barbie then a Barbie she shall have.

'What sort of Barbie do you want?' she asks.

Emma hesitates. This is a big decision. 'I think I want Gymnast Barbie,' she says slowly. 'I saw her on TV. On *Cartoon Connection*. You can twist her all different ways. I'd like to be a gymnast. Or a dancer. Like in the Olympics with those long ribbons.'

Tess cuddles her sturdy, red-haired, freckled girl and tries to imagine her as one of the skeletal nymphs pattering along the Olympic balancing beam.

'Or maybe Esmerelda Barbie, like in the *Hunchback* video. Or a wedding Barbie like Suzie's got.' Emma's voice trails off as she wonders how far she can push. 'Mum?'

'Yes, love?'

'You know that new girl at school, from America? She's got a boat for Barbie, and a pink car and a pony. Could I have a pony too?'

Tess explains that a pony is not possible and thinks of her conversation with Suzie's mother at the school picnic. A global soccer mum she called herself. Every year a different country as Suzie's dad moves on from one dazzling promotion to another. Something in banking or insurance. And money, lots of money.

Money. Always the money. If David still worked there would be more money. She remembers the day, hot and unpleasant with the smell of north wind, ash and dust in the air. It was just after Christmas and David came in with the mail, looking lost and confused. He held out the letter.

> We regret to inform you that, due to our need to maintain a competitive position in our export markets the company has decided to transfer the operations of our Melbourne plant to Indonesia.
>
> All employees will receive a generous redundancy package of two weeks' pay for each year of service.
>
> As a gesture of goodwill the company has also contracted a firm of out-placement consultants to be available should you need any advice about your future career options. Please contact the Human Resources Division if you would like more details.
>
> The company directors sincerely regret the need for this decision, but we do assure you that there was no viable alternative course of action.

'Bastards,' he croaked. 'The fucking ferrets couldn't even tell us to our face before Christmas. Give us a Christmas party and lollies for the kids and then post us their real present.' He stopped and turned to Tess. 'So how long will seven years times eight hundred dollars last us?'

Not long. Not long at all.

The train pulls into the station. There seem to be two sorts of people getting off. There are the suits who stride off with confident purpose, knowing there is a tower, an office and a job waiting for them. And there are others who move more slowly. Over there a haggard young woman with four toddlers struggling to get two pushers out the door. She gratefully accepts Tess's help.

'They're not all mine you know,' she explains. 'I'm looking after them. For friends.' Tess nods and the woman battles off up the ramp.

On the platform three teenage boys lounge on the railway-green seats trying to look arrogant and sullen. Bored and afraid is how they really look she decides.

'Come on, Mum.' Emma tugs at her sleeve, anxious to get started on the shopping.

Stupid to come into town thinks Tess. But when they went to their favourite local toy shop the closing-down sale was almost over. Just a few old packets of Lego and some jigsaw puzzles with broken boxes. 'Just couldn't compete,' the man explained. 'Not with the big places. They've got so much stuff they can always undercut you. They can bury you in advertising. And then they get these teenagers to work for them. Hardly older than this little girl. Here you are, love, would you like this?' The man gives Emma a little stuffed puppy and she looks at her mother to see if it's alright. Tess nods.

They could have gone to the mall except now they've sold the car it's easier to get the train into the city than across the suburbs.

'Okay, Emma. Let's see if we can find this Barbie for you.'

It's not much. Probably entirely the wrong thing. But whenever Tess asks Emma what she wants most of all she says she wants a Barbie, so here they are. And Tess wants to do something. Something to make up for all the late nights and weekends working and telling her to go away and find something to do. For the little girl's frightened face as her tired mother yells, 'And stop that noise. I can't think with all this racket.'

Of course, she should be thankful she has the job. Grateful for the endless hours of work. Data entry doesn't pay much and you never know from week to week what the hours will be. And it seems completely meaningless. Keying in an endless stream of figures for some insurance company in Brisbane – or New York or Tokyo, for all she knows. But there seems to be lots of work. Lots and lots. It just keeps increasing. The boss says they have to get the rates up. More productivity: more hours, same money. It's the competition, he says. From the Philippines or Indonesia or somewhere like that. It shits her. But what can you do?

Emma and Tess stand open-mouthed in front of the Barbie shelves. It's as though all the pink plastic and shimmering nylon and fake silver jewels in the world have been brought together in this one place. 'Look! That one's like Supriya's mum,' Emma shouts, pointing at an Indian Barbie in a sari. 'And there's a black one and a Chinese one.' She runs to the other end of the shelves. 'Here's the car like Suzy has and the pony with a little trailer. Mum its *so* cool!'

Tess wanders along the rows, torn between pleasure at her daughter's excitement and suspicion of what this impossible plastic dream-woman suggests to little girls. She remembers her own Barbie. She remembers loving it and dressing it. Marrying it to Ken in an outdoor ceremony behind the garage. Cutting its blonde hair off in revenge when her own hair turned red and curly. And staring into the mirror and deciding her own stocky, thick-wasted figure would never replicate Barbie's pink-lipsticked glamour.

Emma holds up Gymnast Barbie – blonde, spangled and twirling. The doll has the same fixed, perfect smile she has seen on the Olympic gymnasts on TV and on all the Gymnast Barbie advertisements that accompanied them. Gymnast Barbie is definitely her choice.

As she finishes the day's second big treat, chips and Coke at McDonald's, Emma turns the doll over in her hands. 'Mummy,' she asks, 'who makes my toys?'

In another city, far away, a young Chinese woman hunches over a bowl of noodles in the canteen of a vast toy factory. She has only a few minutes left before she must return to her job of twisting white gymnast slippers and dancing shoes onto tiny doll's feet. She shivers at the thought of trying to

sleep in her bleak concrete room tonight. She will wake tired and worn and will wash in a trickle of cold water. She will gulp a bowl of grey rice and gather her strength for another long day at the factory. At the end of the week she will stuff a few torn notes into an envelope and send them home to her parents in the village in the mountains. There will not be much.

Across the Pacific on the border between Mexico and California another young woman shivers, but this time from fear as much as cold. She is fleeing the Maquiladoras – the free-trade zone. She huddles in the moonlight shadows of a twisted old pine as she waits to make the dash to the fence. With the others she will chop at the base with the cutters and hurl herself underneath where the truck will be waiting. Or perhaps there will be no truck. Perhaps the Yanquis will be there with the torches and handcuffs to arrest her or send her back.

And the hard men have warned her. You talk about unions in the Maquiladoras; there will be trouble. But how can she not? How can she not when she has seen her friends beaten for taking a piece of bread from the factory canteen; seen their children swollen with dysentery? There is no hope here and there just might be some hope across the border. If she can get there tonight.

Far to the north in Alaska another woman cries out in impatience and annoyance. They have spent so much money moving up here to the far green forests and the clear bright sky. A clean place for the children to grow up, away from the choking air and frightening streets of Los Angeles. And they have spent so much money on a state-of-the-art communication system so that their designs can be faxed and Emailed instantaneously to Mattel or Disney or Fisher Price or any other toy company that wants to contract Elf Inc., the sharpest toy-concept designers on the planet. They have such a tight deadline for the CyberDoll and so much money and status at stake. Now this one storm – taking out all their powerlines and cables – could put them way behind the competition. Shane was right, they should have got that satellite dish. How could she be so stupid?

Over the Atlantic the weather is clear and the air-to-ground phone system in Business Class is working fine. Leo Carlyle, the youngest director of the largest advertising firm in Europe, flicks through sketches for the marketing campaign for the CyberDoll as he waits for his financial adviser in Switzerland to come on the line. The campaign looks great, although there will have to be some changes. He makes a note to tell the design people to come up with some lines that will work as well in India and Turkey as these ones will in New York and Sydney. Won't they ever learn that global marketing means local markets?

'Leo? You there mate?'

Leo can never get used to the idea of a Swiss banker with an Australian accent. Steve's good though. Used to be some sort of Treasury official in Canberra. Even worked for a Labor government, he says. 'About those Brazilian timber futures, Steve. Can we get out of them? My Mum's giving me hell since she saw Sting's show about the Amazon and the rainforests and all that crap. Got anything else going?'

'How about a uranium mine on the Barrier Reef?' Steve suggests. 'Just kidding!' He brays like a donkey at the joke. Leo curses. Maybe the cultural gap is wider than he thought.

Emma is tired when she gets home. She would love to just cuddle up on the couch with her mother and play with her doll. But Tess is working tonight. The price she has to pay for taking the day off. Emma's Dad, Dave, is driving taxis again so Emma is to be picked up by Dave's sister Jessie for the evening. Which is okay, because Jessie's place is FUN. Jessie lives in an old inner-city factory that used to make socks and stockings. Now it's been painted yellow and purple and divided into little apartments with strange angles and weird furniture.

Jessie's apartment is right at the top and has a view of the city lights and the planes coming in to land. Jessie tells Emma that she needs to see the planes, so she can feel that she can escape when she needs to. But more and more Jessie escapes down the wire, through her screens and cables and keyboards and modems. Jessie designs web sites for a living and staying over here usually means chatting with other kids around the world on one of the children's news groups that Jessie has set up for her. There's this one ace kid in Finland who has a reindeer for a pet. Emma promised she would send her a photo of herself with a kangaroo. Next time her mother has time to take her to the zoo.

Jessie makes complimentary noises about the new Barbie, even though Emma suspects she doesn't really mean it.

'Do you know how old Barbie is? Or where she comes from?' asks Jessie. 'Maybe we could find out. Let's see.'

For an hour Emma sits happily on Jessie's knee while they explore the worldwide web of Barbie. They see pictures of little girls with their first Barbie. Collectors with thousands of dolls, each in her own glass case. Pages of information about Barbie and Mattel which describe Barbie's 'birth' in a Californian garage in 1959 and how she was inspired by a German doll and cartoon character. They cruise the Mattel site with its catalogues, price lists, order forms and the information that worldwide Barbie sales generate more than $1 billion. Then they find the Barbie artists. The Barbie icon transformed into thousands of images of

playfulness and subversion. Some which Jessie has to censor quickly. Some that have already been censored by corporate legal watchdogs ready to deal with those who would dare to mock their product or undermine Barbie's global good name.

The corporate challenge to free speech in the supposedly democratic world of cyberspace reminds Jessie of McDonald's legal assault on criticism of that company's environmental and labour standards. With Emma asleep on her knee she follows the links through the sites organising protests against McDonald's and other transnational companies. The attempt to build a global boycott against Nike because of the working conditions in its franchise factories in Indonesia. The campaigns against child labour used to make carpets, clothes and soccer balls. The pages linking maritime unions around the world as they attempt to build an alliance to stop Australian soldiers being trained as stevedores in Dubai so they can act as strike breakers in Australian ports.

Jessie convinces herself that her net surfing is really work. After all, only last night she was out celebrating her first big break. A large consultancy setting up an Internet system for environmental organisations all over Asia. Web pages, chat groups, even a specialised search engine. Fantastic. Except for that jerk at the pub who said it was all a waste of money and you couldn't stop real bulldozers with virtual pickets. Well, of course. Obviously you need real people in real local places, too. Why couldn't people see you had to work at all levels if you were to have any chance against the big players with their global ad agencies and their rich-and-famous lifestyles?

Jessie stares out the window. The light from the neon sign across the street flashes and sparkles in the dark rain. She used to love this flat, but now she has to put up with this. A World of Entertainment. Crown Casino. Flash on. Flash off. Flash on.

She turns back to the screen. From Nike to sports and back to games and toys and Barbie and the little girl asleep in her aunt's arms, dreaming of vast flocks of Barbie dolls soaring above the earth, wrapping the planet in ribbons and streamers of red and blue, like the Olympics, on TV, in her head, in her dreams.