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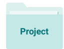

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The Pandemic Play Project: documenting kids' culture during COVID-19

Judy McKinty and Ruth Hazleton

Abstract

The Pandemic Play Project came about because of a moment in history shared by people around the globe, coupled with a recognition of the importance of play in children's lives. This project explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the play lives of Australian children. Because of coronavirus restrictions, it was carried out almost entirely online, during one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world. In 2020, some Australian children spent more time in lockdown than at school with their friends. This highlighted differences in play opportunities, based on where they lived. It also revealed the creative efforts that enabled children to stay playful at home during lockdown. In schoolyards around Australia, the coronavirus permeated children's play as they adapted their games, rhymes and songs to this new theme, and played according to new rules that were not of their own making, and therefore outside their control.

Keywords: children's play; COVID-19 pandemic; digital play; play in lockdown; children's folklore; play in schools; children's health and wellbeing

Introduction: the project in the pandemic

The Pandemic Play Project came about because of a moment in history shared by people around the globe, coupled with a recognition of the importance of play in the lives of children. This independent research project set out to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the play lives of Australian children. The project had the support of a team of Australian academics and independent researchers from three states, who have been collecting, studying and writing about folklore and children's play over many decades (Pandemic Play Project (PPP), 2020a[1]). The aim of the project was to find out:

- how children have taken the coronavirus into their play repertoire
- how they stayed playful at home during lockdown, and
- how the pandemic affected the way they play with their friends at school.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the project was carried out almost entirely online, and with both coordinators living in Melbourne, Victoria, it was conducted under one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world (Mannix, 2020). To understand the context and influences that informed this project, it is necessary to have some understanding of the course of the pandemic in Australia and its effects on children, families and schools, particularly in Victoria and the Melbourne metropolitan area. Victoria, with a population of 6.6 million people, was the only state in Australia to experience a 'second wave' of the coronavirus in

[1] All submissions to the Pandemic Play Project (PPP) are listed under the project title to preserve the anonymity of our informants. Quotes and other project references are used with permission.

2020, requiring a second, extended lockdown. Melbourne, where the 'second wave' began, is the capital city of Victoria, with a population of just over 5 million.

The first reports of COVID-19 in Australia occurred in Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) on January 25, 2020. By March 12 every state and territory had at least one confirmed case of coronavirus. With cases doubling every 3 days social restrictions began, and on March 24 non-essential businesses were closed and Australians were asked to work from home if possible (Ting & Palmer, 2020). In Victoria, South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA) schools closed early for the end-of-term holidays (Andrews, 2020a; Sacks et al., 2020). At the end of March, 'stay-at-home' restrictions were introduced Australia-wide (Snape, 2020). This was the beginning of Australia's first lockdown.

[Fig 1. Soft toys in window]

During this nationwide lockdown, there was a sense that 'we're all in this together'. In Victoria, as in other states and territories, Stage Three restrictions were imposed and 'stay-at-home' rules applied, with only four reasons to leave home: food and supplies; medical and care-giving; exercise; work and education (DHHS, 2020a). It was autumn, the sun was still warm and children rode bikes and scooters on their daily exercise around local streets, spending their school holidays at home. The appearance of soft toys in windows, chalk drawings on the footpaths and 'Spoonvilles' – colourful communities of wooden spoon 'people' – in parks, gave a sense of community support and shared experience (BBC News 2020; Boseley, 2020). People stopped for brief chats, at the appropriate distance, and some neighbours met each other for the first time.

In mid-April, when the school holidays ended, a spike in COVID-19 cases in Victoria meant that most students in that state did not return to the classroom, instead studying from home via online portals and digital programs (ABC, 2020a; Ilanbey, 2002). In early May, only three per cent of children – mostly children of essential health and other workers – were attending Victorian government schools, in contrast to the Northern Territory (NT) which had returned to normal levels of 79 per cent (Sacks et al., 2020). At this time in Victoria there were 'close to a million students learning from home' (Merlino, 2020).

The switch to remote learning revealed inequities in children's access to computers and the internet. Some schools loaned their students equipment to use while in lockdown (Dinham, 2020a), in some cases facilitated by the Department of Education (SVH, 2020). This meant that some children, for the first time, had access to the riches of the internet on their own screens at home. Screens became integral to many children's experiences of lockdown, enabling them to stay connected with friends and play games through digital devices and platforms, in addition to using them for schoolwork.

[Fig. 2. Remote learning]

Towards the end of May, Victorian restrictions were eased (Andrews, 2020b) and a phased return to school took place, in line with the health advice around the risk of COVID-19 for children (AHPPC, 2020; Australian Government, 2020). Around 400,000 students in the three youngest primary school grades (Foundation, Grade 1, Grade 2) and the two most senior secondary levels (Years 11 and 12) returned to school on May 26, with COVID safety plans in place. The remaining students in Grades 3-6 and Years 7-10 went back to school on June 9, (Merlino, 2020). On June 17 our Pandemic Play Project was

launched, and a week later the school term ended. During term two, most of Victoria's school children had attended 'real' school for just two weeks.

Failures in the hotel quarantine program for returned international travellers led to the rapid escalation of Melbourne's coronavirus case numbers (Taylor, 2020). While restrictions in the rest of the country eased and life returned to 'COVID normal', Victoria suffered a severe 'second wave' of the pandemic, causing the closure of state borders and resulting in a police-enforced lockdown of 36 largely working-class suburbs in Melbourne's north and north-west (Durkin, 2020). This was followed three days later, on July 4, by the immediate 'hard lockdown', for five days, of nine high-rise public housing towers in Melbourne's northern suburbs, again with a substantial and powerful police presence (Hayes, 2020). The 'hard lockdown' forced residents, including families with children, to remain inside their homes for the whole five days, with no opportunity to stock up on food, medications and other necessary items. As the Premier of Victoria announced, 'If you're in one of those towers...you will not be allowed to leave your unit, your dwelling within that tower, for any reason'. There was 'no-one allowed in...and no-one allowed out' (Hayes, 2020).

[Fig. 3. Tower block]

Housing Victoria defines public housing as being '...a form of long-term rental social housing that we manage. It is for people on low incomes that are most in need, especially those who have recently experienced homelessness, family violence or have other special needs' (Housing Victoria, 2020). The locked-down public housing towers were home to around 3000 people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees from situations of war and conflict overseas. The 'hard lockdown' was applied and enforced without any warning to residents. Poor communication by authorities, disorganisation and long delays in the delivery of often inadequate supplies left families, some with five or six children, without food and feeling confused, frightened and anxious (Dick & Butler, 2020; Hall & Eddie, 2020; Kwan, Bianchi & Cary, 2020).

The day after the 'hard lockdown' began, an announcement was posted on the Premier of Victoria's Instagram page: 'Every youngster holed up in the nine public housing complexes in Flemington and North Melbourne that have gone into lockdown will each receive one of these activity boxes'. This was accompanied by a photo of a box containing Lego, art materials, a ball, colouring books and other materials (AAP & Stevens, 2020). Unfortunately, the 'activity boxes' that were subsequently discovered in the foyer of one of the public housing towers were not so appealing. Although there were a few playthings, the boxes mostly contained age- and culturally-inappropriate items including adult-sized socks, personal toiletries, sleeping masks, printed manuals of driving instructions, car air fresheners and seeds with no soil for planting them (Williams, 2020). Fortunately, volunteers from the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA) rescued the boxes, removed the contents and repacked them with donated new toys, books, art materials and other children's playthings, sorted by age and gender, and personally delivered them to the children living in the towers (S. Adem, personal communication, 24 September, 2020; Books + Publishing, 2020; Williams, 2020). Subsequent donations of books and sporting equipment were also delivered to young tower residents by AMSSA (S. Adem, personal communication, 24 September, 2020).

[Fig. 4. Boxes of donated items]

Although the reality fell far short of the intention, the fact that someone in the Victorian government thought of the children living in the towers and their need for play opportunities, was an unusual occurrence in terms of children's play during a crisis, as the Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted:

> The Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed a deep concern, that in situations of conflict or disaster children's right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter and medicines. This is despite the fact that play is known to be crucial to children's wellbeing, development, health and survival in these circumstances (IPA, 2020).

On July 9, Stage Three restrictions were again imposed on the whole of Melbourne (Tsirtsakis, 2020). In addition, masks were made mandatory for everyone in Victoria aged 12 years and over (ABC, 2020b), allowing children under 12 to exercise and play outside without having to wear a face covering.

[Fig. 5. Masked Barbie]

But the coronavirus spread rapidly, and on August 2 a State of Disaster was declared (DHHS, 2020b). Metropolitan Melbourne was placed under severe Stage Four restrictions with an unprecedented nightly curfew, regional Victoria was placed under Stage Three restrictions, and lockdown number two began (SBS News, 2020). This time the lockdown was in the middle of winter, and for many children and their families it proved to be a different, far more difficult experience (Sahlberg & Goldfield, 2020). It was particularly distressing for the children and families, living in cramped accommodation, who had already been subject to the 'hard lockdown' a month previously (Dinham, 2020b).

After six weeks the Stage Four restrictions were eased slightly (VIC.GOV.AU, 2020a), and a month later children began another phased return to school (VIC.GOV.AU, 2020b). To this point, since the beginning of the first lockdown on March 30, most children in Victoria had been in lockdown for between 23 and 26 weeks, and had attended school with their friends for just 2 weeks.

The Pandemic Play Project - Methodology

This has been an evolving project. We began because of our personal and professional interest, as folklorists, in children's traditional games and the play culture of the schoolyard. We wanted to find out if the coronavirus had found its way into school playgrounds in the form of games, rhymes or other traces in the children's play. However, during the course of our research we extended the scope to include younger children and a wider range of children's activities. This was necessary because children in Victoria spent more time with their families in lockdown than they did at school. We felt it was important to document play in the moment, rather than trying to capture the past after people had moved on to a more normal life.

The main portal for our project was a Facebook page (PPP, 2020c), which connected to a web site (PPP, 2020d) and email address. This allowed people to submit their contributions as various media: images, video and audio files, short text messages and longer emails. Ruth, as a musician, oral historian and social media user, was familiar with the technology we

needed to gather information and manage the project. We decided against using a survey because we wanted to give people a variety of choices, and allow their information to be submitted in the easiest way for them. The written submissions were mostly from adults, with descriptions and lists of multiple games and activities, sometimes with images, personal comments or observations. The audio and video submissions were games, rhymes and songs in the children's own voices.

Because the project was online, we specified images and other media which did not identify the children or their school. The only source information we required was a child's first name, age, and postcode, but we also asked for parents' or carers' email addresses, to confirm a child's and adult's permissions before uploading anything to our online sites (PPP, 2020e). This proved to be valuable for obtaining supplementary permissions and also for following up with questions about the material we received. In some cases the follow-up contacts led to a deeper understanding of context, more detailed information or the submission of extra material. Submissions showing children's faces were not used publicly, but have been stored in our project archive as reference material.

Although the project coordinators were based in Melbourne, the project itself was not limited to any particular state, region or school, and there was no formal sample group. This was not possible because of the strict COVID-19 restrictions, which prescribed a more informal approach to collecting. We reached out to the wider community via our online portals, and the material we received was, in content and form, exactly what people wanted to send us, and we accepted it willingly and with gratitude.

[Fig 6. Hospital play]

Initially, we regarded this as an informal children's folklore research project, similar to other, more formal, research we have undertaken in schools in the past, to gather information from children about their own culture and play traditions[2] (CTC, 2011a; Darian-Smith, 2012). However as our project, and the pandemic, progressed it became apparent that there was a very real connection between the children's play activities and the efforts of the adults in their lives to keep them engaged and interested in the world beyond their homes. In some households, particularly in single-child families, adults fulfilled the roles of parent, carer, teacher, play facilitator and often playmate.

Adults were also the key to how we were able to collect information from children themselves. Adults helped with the voice and video recordings, took photographs, sent emails with children's descriptions of games, and wrote to us with their own observations of their children at play. On our daily exercise walks, we documented the children's play activities we saw in our neighbourhoods, and these became observations for our project. Adults were also pivotal in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children during lockdown, through play activities and programs delivered to their screens every day.

Our status as independent researchers meant that we depended largely on our own networks and social media contacts to publicise the project. Interviews on Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC, and local radio stations promoted the project interstate. We also had

[2] One example is the Childhood, Tradition and Change Project (CTC), a national study of play funded by the Australian Research Council

support from national organisations, including Play Australia, Early Childhood Education and Care, Playgroup Australia and Network of Community Activities, the peak body for the Out Of School Hours sector, who promoted the project to their members. We 'boosted' the project's Facebook posts a number of times to thousands of people, resulting in multiple 'likes' and 'shares' but, disappointingly, very few new submissions. The most productive contacts came through our personal networks, social media platforms and word-of-mouth transmission, resulting in 63 submissions to October 2020, from every state and territory except SA and the NT, some with a single piece of information, others with detailed descriptions, personal thoughts and observations, lists of activities, photos, video and sound recordings of children and play during the pandemic.

Play in the pandemic - findings from the project

Play in schools

The Pandemic Play Project explored how children used the coronavirus as a theme in their play at school, and documented 'ordinary' schoolyard games to see if they changed in response to COVID-19 restrictions. While we focused on the experiences of Australian children, we were also looking at examples from elsewhere to inform our thinking.

In Australian primary schools, children aged from five to twelve years gather outside in the playground twice a day, at recess and lunch time, to play freely with their friends. The schoolyard is their domain, where their play traditions are learned, practised, adapted and passed on to the next generation of players (McKinty, 2012). In 2020, major disruptions to schooling also meant disruptions to children's play.

The year started normally for Australian schools, and for eight weeks during term one children attended classes and played games, like Catch the Virus Tiggy, with their friends. There was no disruption to their play because of COVID-19. This changed after the nationwide lockdown at the end of March. During lockdown, schools were open only to children whose parents were essential workers or who could not study at home. This was the onsite supervision program, and students were subject to temperature checks (DET, 2020).

One submission to our project was a voice recording of a NSW teacher describing schools without children as 'very lonely environments' (PPP, 2020b; PPP, 2020f). In a written Facebook submission, a Victorian teacher observed that, with such a small number of children at school, they were making friends across different age groups and making special rules to accommodate the 'little kids'. The often gendered play lines were also blurred, with 'girls [battling with spinning tops] in the BeyBlades competitions and boys baking in the sandpit cafe' (PPP, 2020o). The children also developed their own democratic system for choosing which game to play.

After the first lockdown, parents reported some anxiety in children at the thought of going back to school (Edwards, 2020), and teachers were also concerned (Wilson and Mude, 2020). As children in other parts of the country played at school with their friends, most Victorian children were still learning from home. They finally went back to school after another eight weeks of lockdown, and attended school for just two weeks (Prytz, 2020).

One eight-year-old Victorian girl, the only child at her home, spent an 'eventful' first week at school. Her parent reported that [she] 'said it was a horrible week, which seemed to be from many misunderstandings happening in the playground between herself and other children. I think my child had adapted to being around adults at "Mum School" and then had to relearn how to play amongst her peers'. The same girl and her best friend 'didn't want to stop hugging at home time, as if the separation was difficult' (PPP, 2020g).

At some schools children had to stay in their own group and play in their own area (PPP, 2020h), but play at this girl's school was generally unchanged from the way it had been before the lockdown. Children could play freely, with no social distancing, but they did have to sanitise their hands often, particularly before entering the classroom (PPP, 2020g), and sports equipment needed to be sanitised after each use (DET, personal communication, 30 September, 2020). Two girls in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) played a game with the sanitiser, swirling it around in their hands and not letting any spill, until there was nothing left to swirl, and then they rubbed it in (PPP, 2020i).

Environmental cleaning was increased, with cleaners using special liquid to sanitise tables, chairs and other equipment. The cleaning liquid was stored in bottles, and a group of Year 3 boys at one Victorian school started spreading a subversive joke that it looked like 'wee' (urine), despite the fact that it was green and smelled 'delicious' (PPP, 2020g). The absurd notion that the cleaners were sanitising the tables with 'wee' diminished the scary reason for the liquid being there.

Hiding games like 40-40 Home Base and chasing games like Memory Tag and Covid Tiggy were played freely at schools. Tiggy is a chasing game that children can easily adapt in response to events in the news or current issues in wider society (Eberle, 2016). When COVID-19 became a regular news item, chasing games with a coronavirus theme sprang up in schools across the globe (Eberle, 2020; Mohan-Dickson, 2020). The first submission to the Pandemic Play Project was a video recording of a nine-year-old NSW boy describing the schoolyard games Corona Tip and Corona Bullrush (PPP, 2020j), submitted via our Facebook page. The audio was subsequently extracted and posted on our website with permission (PPP, 2020b).

In the basic version of Tiggy, one person is 'It' and chases the other players to touch or 'tag' them. A player who is tagged becomes 'It' instead, and so the chasing role is passed from player to player. In Australian games of Tiggy with a coronavirus theme there are different outcomes, depending on where the game is played. In one version, reported from the Victorian Surf Coast in early March, the player who is 'It' has the coronavirus. The other players carry a stone in their hands (the 'vaccine'), and have to chase him until they catch him and give him an 'injection' (Gorr, L., 2020). Other versions are more like Gang-up Tiggy or 'Build-ups', where everyone 'It' touches catches the virus and also becomes 'It', passing the virus on to other players. Thus, the game mirrors the spread of the virus in real life (PPP, 2020k). Another version, from girls in the ACT, is Covid Tips, which is 'an always "on" game', and players have to remain alert in case they are tagged unexpectedly (PPP, 2020i). Yet another version from Victoria requires players to tag with their elbows (PPP, 2020l).

While children took COVID-19 into their play repertoire, CSIRO[3]'s Health and Biosecurity Director, Rob Grenfell, used a schoolyard reference to explain the length of time between infection and the onset of symptoms: 'It's like playing a game of Tiggy at school and someone is tagged, but they don't become 'It' for another hour or two into the game' (Bachelard, 2020).

An interesting example of verbal lore was collected in relation to Coronavirus Tips in NSW. A ten-year-old girl, describing the game, used the phrase '...they can't tip the butcher back for, like, ten seconds' (PPP, 2020b; PPP, 2020m). This means that when someone is tagged or 'tipped', the rule prevents her from immediately tagging the person back. The same expression was used in Australia at least 20 years ago (Factor, 2000), and it was again collected in 2009 in Queensland (QLD), as part of a project to document children's play in Australian schools (CTC, 2011b). In the United Kingdom (UK) there is a much longer history. Iona and Peter Opie discovered that the same rule, albeit with a different expression, 'Feign double-touch!', was being used in chasing games in 1859 (Opie, 1969).

Songs about the coronavirus were usually simple, spontaneous and transient. This example, from a ten-year-old NSW girl, was submitted as a voice recording:

> COVID-19, that's my name,
> Ask me again, I'll say the same.
> Not COVID-18 or COVID-20,
> COVID-19 is ME! (PPP, 2020n)

We also collected non-coronavirus-related games, rhymes and songs, including a song which accompanied a stabbing hand game, learned in the brief return to school between the two lockdowns in Victoria, and submitted as a video recording (PPP, 2020c). It starts:

> I've got all my fingers, the knife goes chop, chop, chop!
> If I miss the spaces in between my fingers will come off... (PPP, 2020l).

Play in lockdown

Play is vitally important to children. Through their play, they can make sense of the world and connect with each other. In times of crisis, play helps them process potentially overwhelming events at their own level of understanding, and express their thoughts and feelings about them. They can explore some of the big questions of human existence in the safe company of their friends, while playing a game (Cray, 2020).

[Fig 7. Skates on inside]

In 2020, almost all children in Australia had personal experience of being in lockdown; in Melbourne, the second lockdown lasted longer than 100 days (Dowse, Knowlton and Russo, 2020). During this time, families and children found creative ways to stay playful and engaged. As one child wrote: 'We stayed home and found new ways to play' (PPP, 2020k). Sometimes bending the rules, like being allowed to wear their skates inside, gave children a sense of play in an otherwise unchanging routine (PPP, 2020k). There was even a word for

[3] Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

this: 'blursday, when your days are blurry because you've been in your house for too long' (PPP, 2020h).

Simple, open-ended play materials were in demand: large cardboard boxes were transformed into cubbies and forts, smaller ones had other uses. One Queensland parent wrote:

> At the start of COVID, my kids made a 'Coronavirus'. It was a box they pulled around with them everywhere and played with, calling it their 'corona pet'. I think they were processing the idea of [the virus] being a bug. We have had many conversations with them about the situation and the 'corona pet' has since disappeared' (PPP, 2020p).

A four-and-a-half-year-old Victorian girl used a cardboard box as a 'plane' to fly her grandparents, who live in UK, to where she wanted them to go. The grandparents were talking with her on an iPad, which had been placed in the box. In the video, they can be seen talking with her on the screen as she tows the box along (PPP, 2020q).

[Fig 8. Box forts]

Very young children absorbed the coronavirus messages on their own level. A girl of two years, five months exclaimed, 'No, don't share cups. You might get coronapirates!' (PPP, 2020r), and a one-year-old Tasmanian boy was told the rules for handwashing by his five-year-old sister, while they played with bubbles in the bathroom sink (PPP, 2020s).

Some children learned new skills, like doing magic tricks or riding a bike, and families shared outdoor experiences like geocaching and bush walking, although local playgrounds were closed. The experience of lockdown, and opportunities for play, depended on where people lived. Families living in suburbia explored local streets and parks, others living in outer areas could go to the beach or the bush. For families in high-rise public housing towers, with no backyard for play, lockdown was a test of their resilience and perseverance against sometimes overwhelming odds.

[Fig 9. Captain Covid]

The close and continual proximity of adults to children who are usually at school all day sometimes caused tensions, and resulted in disputes over the use of shared spaces (Foster, 2020). Trampolining, making bike jumps in the park, riding scooters in the street and running in open spaces were some of the ways children expended their surplus energy.

Digital play

With movement limited to the local area, screens became a portal to the outside world: school moved online and children attended classes via remote learning. Families and friends stayed connected through on-screen visits and games. Many organisations became skilled in presenting on-screen play and learning sessions for children, including 'Playgroup at Home', delivered by staff of state and territory playgroup organisations (Playgroup Australia, 2020). Children in high-rise public housing towers were supported through personalised, creative play activities, developed by local playworkers who shared them online, with materials

delivered to children's homes beforehand (The Venny Inc., 2020; D. von der Borch, personal communication, 4 October, 2020).

[Fig 10. Playing Chess online]

A new familiarity with online classrooms, meetings and school assemblies led families to explore communication platforms that would allow children to stay connected with their friends. While some children were already familiar with interactive online games like Roblox and Minecraft prior to the pandemic, their communication was generally limited to the use of written chat functions to coordinate their play. Within weeks of lockdown commencing, children were easily able to integrate interactive video and spoken communication platforms with online games (Basu, 2020). As a result, play became more immediate, cooperative and fluid.

In late March, as the popularity of gaming rose, the World Health Organisation (WHO) launched the #PlayApartTogether campaign, in collaboration with key players in the digital games industry. The campaign amplified physical distancing messages by encouraging people to play together online, and also incorporated in-game health and safety messaging (Takahashi, 2020). In early to mid-March in Australia, the sales of gaming consoles and machines across the market rose by 19.6% in one week, then 285.6% the following week (Dring, C., 2020). This trend continued throughout Melbourne's second lockdown, with gaming equipment and accessories becoming difficult to acquire. However, for some, the dramatic uptake in gaming during the pandemic has not been an easy thing to come to terms with.

Concerns about online safety and bullying, as well as the potential health and psychological impacts of technology use on children, have dominated public discussion about screen usage for years (Walmsley, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly magnified these concerns. Not only have children been participating in longer playing times, they have been navigating more frequent interaction with public players on either unregulated or self-regulated servers. Consequently, parents have been forced to examine, re-consider and re-think our attitudes and beliefs regarding childhood, screen time and online games as legitimate play activity. In April 2020, Byrne and Kardefelt Winther, writing for UNICEF*,* stated that

> Video games and social media can offer meaningful experiences during a pandemic: connectedness in a time where social interaction is reduced; entertainment when options are limited; and a tool to help take the edge off of anxiety and fear.

Online play displays many of the same characteristics we associate with traditional forms of play (Mavoa & Carter, 2020). Thus, it also serves as a lens through which children can explore difficult and frightening events over which they have no control (Katch, J., 2008). Like the schoolyard game of Covid Tiggy, children have incorporated the pandemic and other significant world events, including the #BlackLivesMatter movement, into their online play in many ways. The following is a case study illustrating some of the ways in which children can manipulate technology to fit their play culture and to incorporate the pandemic into their play.

[Fig 11. BLM Minecraft]

Case Study: Charlie and Lola **(PPP, 2020t)**

Both aged 9, Charlie (Melbourne, Victoria) and Lola (Geraldton, Western Australia) were introduced by their mothers shortly after lockdown commenced in Australia. They have never met, but played the same games online and were seeking other children to connect with while socially isolating. Lola usually plays on her mother's smartphone (sometimes an Xbox) and Charlie plays on iPad. They use Messenger Kids (a Facebook app) to talk while they play.

Initially, they played Minecraft in both 'creative' and 'survival' modes. Both options allow children to engage in deep imaginative play, creating and interacting either with their own worlds or formulating strategies to combat challenges. They also played competitive team games, like Skywars and Eggwars (popular sub-games constructed by other players and developers), on separate servers. Like Minecraft, Roblox is also a game that consists of mini games, such as Adopt Me and Jailbreak, and quickly replaced Minecraft as their preferred game. Despite the millions of players these games attract worldwide (in the case of Adopt Me, over 42 million players monthly), there are vast opportunities to share and negotiate intimate gameplay with other individuals (Kotney, 2020). Who children can interact with, and how, depends on parental settings.

Great care is taken in selecting gaming names and outfitting a personal avatar or other owned assets, like pets and vehicles. Seemingly trivial, the importance of identity experimentation, engagement with risk-taking, the role of self-esteem and skill development in open-ended play has been well documented (Deen, et al., 2015). In many online games, players opted to join or create groups to combat COVID-19, and a wide variety of masks made by developers and players themselves were made available and worn in-game. Charlie and Lola invented their own group (albeit not well populated) called 'We Hate COVID-19'.

[Fig 12. Minecraft mask skins]

The introduction of verbal communication to the shared game experience has resulted in language once assigned to chat formats entering verbal culture. Charlie and Lola use slang terminology while playing: 'n00b' (a new player); 'glitch' (an in-game fault that may or may not advantage the player who discovers it); to 'oof' (to die) and 'troll' (a player who disrupts play and provokes serious players just to get a reaction).

Outside the games themselves, the pair has shared spontaneous play moments, including cooking together, taking photographs of each other, using Messenger Kids, while challenging each other to perform physical challenges, and playing the piano in turns. A Covid song (a parody of the popular song 'Everything is AWESOME!' from *The Lego Movie*) has also become part of their shared lore:

> Everything is ba-d,
> Everything is bad 'cause of COVID-19,
> Everything is ba-d,
> 'Cause we're stuck in quarantine (PPP, 2020t).

In relation to the wider project, over thirty submissions relating to digital play were received in the first four months of the project. The experience of Charlie and Lola was very similar to the experiences of many other children in the new virtual playground (Turner, 2020). The most popular shared games were Minecraft, Roblox, Among Us and Fortnite.

Sport and racing-based games have also been popular alongside team-based social games and traditional games like chess and checkers.

The most common gaming devices reported include Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch, PC, iPad and smartphones. Communications formats included Zoom, WebEx, Messenger Kids, Discord, Google Hangouts and FaceTime, with one informant reporting that neighbours even provided walkie talkies so that their children could stay in touch while playing Minecraft (PPP, 2020u).

In the digital gaming realm children are often the family experts, and the traditional transfer of knowledge is sometimes reversed. One father described how his nine-year-old daughter introduced him to Minecraft 'when remote work and remote school had finished for the day':

> ...She created a creative, peaceful 'Dad Learning' world on my device and was able to join me in the game to show me how to find the menu with all the different materials ...how to create a building with windows, open and close doors and even fly! She also created other worlds on her device and built houses for us to share while we explored and created all kinds of wonderful things together. Sharing screen time in this manner...has been a lot of fun and has enabled me to spend time playing with her in a very different environment compared with the card and board games we have been utilising up until now (PPP, 2020u).

Conclusion

As long-time folklorists and children's play researchers we recognised, from the outset of the pandemic, the crucial role that play would be taking in children's lives during these extremely disruptive, unpredictable and anxious times. Our previous experience in researching play among children from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds, and the knowledge and insights we gained during the Pandemic Play Project, confirmed our belief that play can be particularly important in times of uncertainty and upheaval and can help support children's wellbeing.

We started the project with three aims, to try and discover the effects of and relationships between the COVID-19 pandemic and children's play in schools and homes, during 'normal' times and while in lockdown. The information we collected revealed that in a number of schools children were adapting their play activities to incorporate the coronavirus theme in some way. While we know that some of the changes, particularly in their verbal play, were impromptu and fleeting, we do not know how long their 'covid' games and play activities have lasted. Are children still playing Covid Tag, or have they moved on or back to other forms of play, as the threat of the virus has become less immediate in their own community? This is an area which could be followed up with further research in schools in different parts of Australia and elsewhere.

There is much more to be written about this project and the way children have experienced the pandemic through their play. The full impact of the lockdown on children living in the high-rise public housing towers, and the way they were supported by playworkers from the local adventure playground, has only been touched on. The relationship between play and place and adult roles in maintaining children's engagement are other important elements of the story. However, one outcome of the project has been a recognition

of the absolutely fundamental role of play in the lives of children, particularly in times of crisis.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. Soft toys in a Melbourne window. (McKinty, 2020)

Figure 2. Remote learning during lockdown (Hazleton, 2020).

Figure 3. Public housing towers in North Melbourne, courtesy Barbara Champion, 2020.

Figure 4. Items donated to AMSSA for children in the North Melbourne public housing towers, courtesy Sabrina Adem, 2020.

Figure 5. Masks became part of doll play during the second Melbourne lockdown, courtesy Amber Koster, 2020.

Figure 6. Children set up their own hospitals to treat COVID-19 patients, courtesy Vicky Tu Featherston, 2020.

Figure 7. Bending the rules helped children to stay playful during lockdown, courtesy Kylie Weisheit, 2020.

Figure 8. Cardboard boxes were used to make forts and cubbies, courtesy Kylie Weisheit, 2020.

Figure 9. Captain Covid – 'He goes around shoving cotton swabs up people's noses', courtesy Jo Windred, 2020.

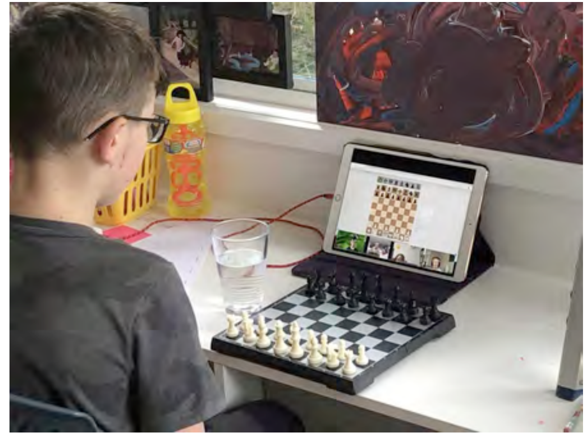

Figure 10. Playing chess online. Playing screen games helped children to stay connected with each other, courtesy Kylie Weisheit, 2020

Figure 11. Other world events found their way into children's play during the pandemic (Hazleton, 2020).

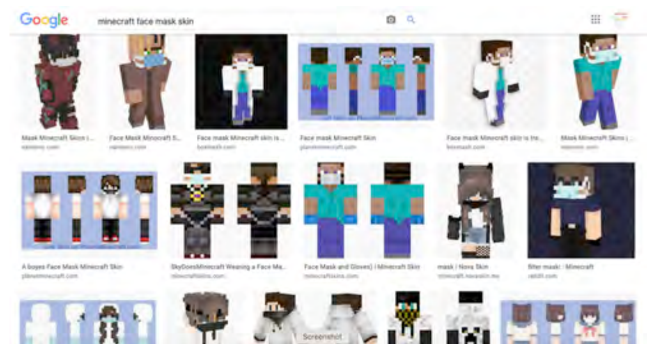

Figure 12. Masks and other personal protective equipment developed by Minecraft players for their avatars (Hazleton, 2020)

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Judy McKinty is an independent children's play researcher, based in Melbourne, with a special interest in children's folklore and traditional games. Her work over the past 30+ years includes playground surveys for schools, multicultural games workshops, an Aboriginal Children's Play oral history project with Dr. June Factor and field research for the Childhood, Tradition and Change Project, a national study of play funded by the Australian Research Council. She has been closely involved in research, exhibitions and other projects for some of Australia's significant cultural and educational organisations, including Museums Victoria, the University of Melbourne, the National Library of Australia and the National Museum of Australia. Her main area of interest has been researching, collecting and sharing children's play and traditional games from different countries and cultures. Locally, she has mainly focused on play in primary schools and the relationship between play and place. Judy has a Master of Cultural Heritage (Deakin), is an Honorary Associate of Museums Victoria, a Life Member of Play Australia and was a co-editor of the online journal *Play and Folklore*, published by Museums Victoria.

Ruth Hazleton is an independent oral historian, researcher, folklorist and musician who has specialised in children's folklore studies. She holds a Graduate Diploma in Australian Folklife Studies (Curtin University, Western Australia), and is currently working for the National Library of Australia. She is a member of Museums Victoria's Australian Children's Folklore Collection Reference Committee, and conducted field research for both the official and pilot studies associated with the Childhood, Tradition and Change project, a nation-wide study documenting the historical development of Australian children's playlore over a fifty-year period. Ruth has published a number of folklore articles including 'Documenting Play: From the Front Line' in *Play and Folklore* (2017) and 'Where Did That Tune Come From?', in *Antipodean Traditions: Australian Folklore in the 21st Century*, ed. G. Seal and J. Gall (Black Swan Press: 2011). Ruth also writes periodically for her folklore blog, *A Hidden Culture,* and volunteers for the Australian Magic Research Project, documenting apotropaic objects and symbols found in colonial and nineteenth-century buildings.

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