
The ‘pandemic play’ themed issue of global studies of childhood: An editorial

Accepted version

Global Studies of Childhood

2024, Vol. 14(1) 3–8

John Potter

Yinka Olusoga

Valerio Signorelli

This themed issue of Global Studies of Childhood on ‘Pandemic Play’ draws mainly on the ‘Play Observatory’ project, 2020–2022, a 17-month exploration of children’s playworlds during the COVID-19 pandemic. Four articles in the issue are written by researchers from that project. We have also been able to include a further two articles which have come from the UK and Poland respectively, employing arts-based methods which are complementary to the Play Observatory. In this editorial, we will draw some of the key strands in all of the articles together and set out some of the emergent themes which provide a picture of a particular moment in history and our attempts to hear children’s voices on their own experiences.

The Play Observatory

The motivation behind the proposal was the fact that few, if any, of the projects which were being funded in the UKRI call were exploring the affective response of children to the changed circumstances of lockdown precipitated by the pandemic. The UCL and Sheffield teams were building on their previous experiences of working on projects focused on children’s play: *Playing the Archive 2017–2019* and *Children’s Games in the New Media Age, 2009–2011*, funded in the UK by the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) and AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) respectively, both of which were led by Andrew Burn and Jackie Marsh. These projects were connected to the Opie Archive of Children’s Play and project team members were, and still are, leading the British Academy Research Project, ‘Childhoods and Play: The Iona and Peter Opie Archive’ (see The Opie Archive Website, 2019). The impulse was there-fore not only to explore the current impact of the pandemic as part of a social science

research project but also to work in an archival way, with an eye on documenting children's experiences during the pandemic for future generations and creating a searchable archive.

The Play Observatory's methods

The multidisciplinary team had shared principles that informed the project's approach and aims. We focused on and valued children's everyday play and the richness of their cultural worlds. We saw children and young people as culturally productive. Informed by the work of Sutton-Smith (1997) we applied a broad and inclusive conceptualisation of play. Methodologically, social distancing measures necessitated that data collection was carried out entirely remotely and online. Nevertheless, we applied ethnographic, participatory and multimodal perspectives to an online research design (Cowan et al., 2022).

Paradoxically, whilst the digital technology of the 21st century provided the means of data collection, the analogue approach of Iona and Peter Opie from the post-World War II 20th century became our most helpful touchstone. Starting in the 1950s, the Opies conducted national surveys of children's play and cultural practices via asynchronous postal communication (Bishop, 2013). They evolved open-ended and accessible forms of questioning and prompting that enabled over 20,000 children to reply to their surveys, providing details of their everyday play, the accumulated richness of which is collected in their archive and underpins their many books. They would also follow up with correspondence (with adult gatekeepers and, via them, to specific children) to pursue interesting lines of enquiry and tease out more information.

Taking inspiration from the Opies, and harnessing the multimodal potential of digital technology, the Play Observatory designed an online, qualitative survey. It featured flexible, open-ended questions, prompts to encourage contributors to add detail and opportunities to upload visual and audio files. Experimentally, it also invited contributors to record how their play had made them feel, via text and/or use of emojis (Olusoga et al., 2022). Complementing the survey we conducted ethnographic case studies with 14 children and their families, most of whom had also contributed to the survey). Conducted online, they allowed a deeper dive into play

experiences, and the children were also invited to express their thoughts about their play creatively, via photographs, drawings and films.

The Play Observatory: Behind the scenes

The enforced remote nature of our research prompted us to reflect and explore different approaches to disseminate the experiences collected during our surveys and interviews. The heterogeneous data collected, which ranged from drawings, text, video and images in various forms and formats, posed challenges not only in the cataloguing process but also in presenting these media in a coherent and informative manner in the form of an online exhibition (The Play Observatory et al., 2022).

Our primary goal was to ensure wider access to the exhibition while providing an engaging experience for the contributors and anyone interested in learning more about play activities conducted during the extensive lockdowns of the pandemic. The exhibition serves as a snapshot in time, intended to communicate not only with present-day visitors but also with future audiences.

In close collaboration with the curator, Katy Canales, from the Young V&A, who provided valuable curatorial expertise, alongside the skilled game designers at EpisodStudio, we co-created the unique experience of the 'Play in the Pandemic' online digital exhibition (The Play Observatory et al., 2022). We intentionally aimed to provide an additional solution for accessing the collected content, alongside the more traditional cataloguing front-end approaches used in specialised institutions. While these traditional methods are easily queryable and indispensable tools for researchers, they often lack accessibility for the general public.

The brief produced was skilfully interpreted by Sindi Breshani and Juliette Coquet from EpisodStudio. The digital exhibition avoided replicating a physical exhibition in digital form. Instead, they developed a novel and engaging interface that takes the form of an interactive origami house. In this setup, the categories of the catalogue are visually represented by four rooms within the house. Each room contains three objects, each serving as an additional sub-category.

In addition to providing access to the collected material, the exhibition itself

became a tool that offered suggested activities, in collaboration with the play team from the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London. It also offered the option to print and physically construct a paper-based origami house. The fast-paced interactive process and collaborative activity culminated in the public opening of the Play in the Pandemic online exhibition on 23rd March 2022.

The four Play Observatory articles

In the intervening time, the project team has been analysing and writing about the data collected, according to several interrelated themes and theoretical perspectives. In this themed edition of *Global Studies of Childhood*, there are four articles by Play Observatory team members, in various combinations. In 'Den building, filmmaking and the postdigital in the Play Observatory', Potter, Cannon and Cowan analyse and discuss Play Observatory survey submissions which centre on children's use of space and place in their play. Images of den-building showed imaginative productions of worlds in the spaces of the home in which children felt secure. Arguably, this had to do with the way they used material artefacts in their play to move the locus of control closer to themselves, even as the world seemed out of control for many. In the same way, video clips and films submitted to the Observatory revealed much about everyday life during the pandemic, the third spaces that were enabled, and the postdigital worlds of entanglement in which children played, offering insights into young people's postdigital and collusive creative practices and their playful imbrication of material and cultural resources.

The emphasis in Olusoga, Bannister and Bishop's article – 'Infection or Inflection? Reflecting on Constructions of Children and Play through the Prism of the COVID-19 Pandemic' – is to highlight and challenge assumptions made by adults about children's play when it reflects ideas, languages and practices associated with times of crisis. The paper brings together examples of children's play submitted by families to the Play Observatory's (inter)national online, qualitative survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, with historical examples of children's self-reported play, referencing themes including contagion, healing, illness and death, that feature in the archive of British folklorists of children's play, Iona and Peter Opie. Drawing on folklore and cultural histories of childhood, the authors

identify how social constructions of childhood, play, pollution and risk tend to frame children's play as a focus of adult anxieties. The authors interrogate the oft-used 'resilience' narrative that is applied to children, and the protective discourses that can limit adult interpretations of play. They introduce the concept of 'inflection' to suggest how habitual and personal forms of play may be made to temporarily accommodate contemporary issues by the players as opposed to being 'infected' with troubling or distressing themes.

In "I danced on the road to the Macarena song which felt a bit naughty": Affective entanglements and the wayfaring pandemic child', Olusoga applies a posthumanist lens to discuss children's playful and affective entanglements during the COVID-19 pandemic. She conceptualises 'the pandemic child' as an emergent subject, made possible via new and shifting forms of intra-acting entanglement of the human and the more-than-human. A (re)examination of three contributions to the Play Observatory survey centres on mapping the emergence of moments of affective intensity (Hollett and Ehret, 2014) and unfolding joy (Nordström et al., 2021) 2021 in these episodes of play and leisure. This serves to highlight the rich and rhizomatic complexities of children's experience of place, affect and relations, even under the most severe social restrictions of pandemic lockdown. Olusoga problematises the tendency of post-pandemic policy discourses to frame the pandemic almost exclusively in terms of learning loss and curriculum coverage about children. Drawing on Ingold (2016) and Thorpe et al. (2023) she challenges us to consider how the wayfaring, knowing-feeling-moving pandemic child emerged from new and unfolding configurations of place, analogue, digital and hybrid.

Cowan's article 'Pandemic Playthings: A Multimodal Perspective on Toys and Toy Play in the Time of COVID-19' considers how toys have featured in children's play throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst often dismissed as trivial novelties, toys can be seen as a significant aspect of material culture, both reflecting and constructing ideas of childhood. A multimodal social semiotic perspective is used to examine a selection of toys produced between 2020 and 2022 that respond to the pandemic in various ways. The toys feature representations of the virus, of accessories for enacting pandemic practices such as mask-wearing and vaccination, and of pandemic

'heroes'. In addition to these commercially produced toys, examples of toy play collected by the Play Observatory project from 2020 to 2022 are also analysed. These real-world instances demonstrate toys and everyday objects being used to playfully make sense of, and communicate understandings of, the COVID-19 pandemic. In combination, the examples reveal discourses embedded in the design of 'pandemic playthings' and ways in which toy play demonstrated children's agentic meaning-making, including awareness and understandings about the pandemic they may not have articulated verbally. In this way, toys and toy play are seen as deeply meaningful, revealing stories about children and childhood in the time of COVID-19.

Two further contributions from Poland and the UK

Our colleagues, Maciejewska-Mroczek and Radkowska-Walkowicz, write about the ways the pandemic affected different age groups in different ways in Poland where children were positioned as potential 'spreaders' of the disease, and a threat to the safety of others.

In a further, UK-based paper, 'Towards attentive, playful arts-based methodology with Children', Lomax and Smith share methodological insights from their research which aimed to centre children in the production of knowledge during the 2020 global pandemic to consider how this can inform research with children beyond the crisis. Drawing on their longitudinal participatory arts-based research with thirty children aged 9–12 during 2020–2022, the paper illustrates the authors' response to the shifting research landscape which included navigating social restrictions to develop child-centred ways of working with socially distanced arts-based methods and technologies. They set out key principles focused on foregrounding children's ways of knowing and attentive seeing which underpinned their reframing of the research encounter from one in which adults are intent on extracting children's ready-made thoughts to a space in which knowledge generation is recognised as a process of co-construction and engagement with children. Central to this process is a commitment to feminist care ethics and the application of principles from early childhood research and pedagogy which prioritise attentiveness to younger children's rhythms and pace.

Concluding thoughts

We hope that this volume will provide inspiration and insights into the experience of play in times of crisis and inspire thinking about methodological issues around participatory research with children and how best to theorise it. We wish to thank the contributors to the themed issue and acknowledge their input: Kate Cowan, Catherine Bannister, Julia Bishop, Michelle Cannon, Helen Lomax, Kate Smith, Ewa Maciejewska-Mroczek and Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz. This project valued collaboration and communication around childhood and sought to surface and centre children's voices at this particular time in history, placing them in dialogue with the past, present and future.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The 'Play Observatory', whose official title was 'A National Observatory of Children's Play Experiences during COVID-19', was funded by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under the UKRI Rapid Response to COVID-19 fund. The award number was ES/V015451/1.

References

- Bishop J (2013) The working papers of Iona and Peter Opie. *Oral Tradition* 28(2): 205–216.
- Cowan K, Potter J and Cannon M (2022) Researching Children's play using online ethnographic case studies: Insights from the play observatory. In: Perchard M (ed.) *SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online*. London: Sage, pp.1–10.
- Hollett T and Ehret C (2014) "Bean's world": (Mine) crafting affective atmospheres of gameplay, learning, and care in a children's hospital. *New Media & Society* 17(11): 1849–1866.
- Ingold (2016) *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Olusoga Y, Bannister C, Bishop JC, et al. (2022) Preserving the present: Designing a child-centered qualitative survey for a national observatory of children's Play. In: Perchard M (ed.) *SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online*. London: Sage, pp.1–17.
- The Opie Archive Website (2019) *Childhoods and Play: The Iona and Peter Opie Archive*. Available at:

https://www.opiearchive.org/about/childhoods_and_play (accessed 14 March 2023).

The Play Observatory, Young V & A and Episod Studio (2022) Play in the Pandemic. Available at: [https:// playinthepandemic.play-observatory.com/](https://playinthepandemic.play-observatory.com/) (accessed 20 December 2022).

Sutton-Smith B (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Thorpe H, Brice J, O'Leary G, et al. (2023) Women's physical activity as becoming: Lines of flight from the fitness assemblage. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 47(4): 303–327.