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Trans-spatial, trans-media flows: Family ethnographies of children's creative exploration of identities in and out of digital space(s)

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Introduction

There is no doubt that COVID19 caused seismic and unprecedented change, including but not limited to home lives, educational structures and children's digital/postdigital play. As we write this, March 2020 is over three and a half years' ago and something of a distant memory, and yet, as evidenced across academic writing, fiction, memoir and the general cultural consciousness, we are still unpicking what happened and the more permanent changes made by the pandemic to ways of living and ways of thinking. In this way, academic writing can be seen to serve multiple purposes, enabling a critical lens on these experiences but also affording us a space to put to paper the practices we observed, and in which we engaged, with some of the benefits of perspective that the 'new normal' has brought us (cf Rice & Dallaqua, 2022; Arnott & Teichert, 2022).

In our chapter we reflect on our own experiences of family life during COVID19 lockdowns in the North of England, through a lens inspired by reflexive family (auto)ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). Our interest is in children's playful and creative episodes of identity exploration, both in and out of digital space (Parry, 2021). Both authors were working together in the same University department as the pandemic hit, with family circumstances which aligned in multiple ways, including children of similar ages. A few months into the pandemic, in September 2020, we - the chapter authors - started to work more closely together as we both took up joint leadership of an undergraduate programme. In this shared role we navigated the complexities of teaching, supporting students, and researching during different stages of the UK response to the crisis, while also engaging with periods of lockdown and full and partial school closures. Shifting policies and practices over the course of the pandemic (Cairney, 2020) meant lockdowns were both 'official' and fluid, including 'bursting bubbles', where a case of COVID19 would mean another period of isolation at home for all children sharing a class. Bursting bubbles were a dominant feature of the 2020-21 school year. Our shared experiences of the challenges of balancing a complex academic student-facing workload during a period of crisis, while supporting our own children and wider families, which also included vulnerable older people, built closeness for us as colleagues, and we felt able to share the frustrations as well as some of the more positive aspects of this time. This was particularly true in terms of our experiences of being at home with our children most of whom were in primary school at the time (ages 7 and 10 in Jessica's case and ages 9 and 12 for Yinka).

Being in the home for extended periods of time over the course of the restrictions period meant a radical displacement - and therefore rethinking - of home/school/work boundaries (Gourlay et al., 2021). We are, however, conscious in writing this of the relatively privileged position we ourselves were in - being able to 'pivot' our work online and work from home, having reasonably flexible academic jobs, and belonging to households benefiting from stable middle class incomes (cf. Khan, 2022). We did not have to face the uncertainty of precarious employment nor have roles that put us into contact with the public, and therefore at more risk. However we did experience what Rice and Dallacqua describe from a posthumanist perspective as 'entangled agencies' (2022, pg. 374) as academic mothers (see also Olusoga & Bannister, 2023).

Whilst the examples we offer here are from the UK, we recognise that COVID19 disruptions and lockdown periods were experienced internationally in diverse and complex ways, with unprecedented effects (Reimers, 2022; Harmey & Moss, 2023). In the UK, from early 2020 it became clear that global events were going to be significant, and on 23 March 2020 the closure of schools to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of key workers was announced. Large numbers of pupils remained at home (the ONS stated that 'between 7 May and 7 July 2020, 87% of parents said a child in their household had been homeschooled because of the coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic'), provided with educational materials of different kinds and, in some but not all cases, synchronous online classes.

Situating our work: the research landscape of COVID19

Our chapter adds to the growing area of research which seeks to unpack experiences of COVID19 lockdowns, drawn from multiple perspectives and through diverse lenses. That these narratives would cross disciplines is unsurprising, given the widespread impact of the pandemic across fields and spaces. Discourses of 'learning loss', of 'learning disruption' (Harmey & Moss, 2021; Parry, 2021) and 'catch up' abounded, and continue to circulate almost four years on. An Educational Endowment Fund evidence review (2022) explored COVID19's impact on different groups of children, including disadvantaged children and with attention to regional variation, finding that all pupils, but in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were negatively affected by pandemic disruption to education. Within the report the authors also make reference to pupil wellbeing and the effects of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health. But what children were doing in homes across the UK and internationally, beyond 'formal education' and beyond notions of 'loss', was of significant interest. Taking alternative lenses on lockdown activities, interdisciplinary research in Childhood Studies explored how children and young people were playing during COVID19, including creating a digital repository and co-curating a virtual exhibition with the Young V&A museum on the topic of *Play in the Pandemic* (Play Observatory, October 2020 to March 2022). Emergent research findings included insights into the role of digital play in enabling children to 'socially connect with others while being physically separated, helping children's play endure, adapt and respond to restrictions' (Cowan et al., 2021, pg. 14).

Likewise, scholars in Literacies and other fields continue to contest the deficit nature of 'learning loss' discourse (Harmey & Moss, 2023; Pahl et al., 2023), aiming to 'shine a different light' on more deficit lines of discussion. Among research in this area are studies which foreground the identity work at play in children's lives during periods of restrictions. Burke and colleagues (2023) describe children's digital play as 'collective family resilience', drawing on research from Newfoundland with children aged 2-10 years' old, exploring how parents and carers reacted to and supported digital play within the home. Outlining some of the anxieties parents had about the 'digital' during lockdowns, they outline the ways in which families had to negotiate different aspects of their working and home lives in a context that was constantly changing. The authors argue that 'digital play was not all bad' (pg. 9), instead demonstrating that 'it supported children's agency and turned into a collective resource of resilience within the family to overcome stressors caused by the pandemic' (ibid). A key finding here is that the ability to 'embrace' different ways of playing, working, educating collectively in the home led to a more manageable pandemic (ibid), using the concept of 'resilience' as supported by 'the discovery of the benefits and possibilities of digital play and its incorporation into home life, such as baking and milestone events' (pg. 30).

The notion of a 'whole body, holistic experience' (Arnott & Teichert, 2022, pg. 35) is invoked in a COVID19 autoethnographic study to engage critically with circulating discourses of learning loss. The authors draw on their experiences as working academic parents and early childhood specialists to describe practices in the home which supported and fostered young children's learning, while they balanced multiple roles. They foreground 'fear vs joy' (pg. 47), in terms of anxieties relating to safety and capacity for homeschooling, and the joy in spending time at home with their families in an unexpected way. Shifting the focus to the experiences of parent/scholars themselves, Rice and Dallacqua describe what they call 'competing agencies of mother, child, colleagues and screen' (pg.381). Their auto-ethnographic work highlights glimmers of hope that flexibility, suddenly enabled by the pandemic, held for parents in the academic workplace and the positive aspects of making work-life visible. However they note that the promises of increased flexibility tended to disappear as the months went on, in the 'return to normal'. Gourlay and colleagues (2021), in a study focusing on what academics did during the pandemic in terms of exploring and negotiating boundaries during a time of disruption describe those practices as 'emergent, restless and shifting semiotic assemblages' (pg.377).

Therefore, the everyday, and what became normal and unremarkable during the pandemic in terms of on- and offline activity, foregrounded the postdigital, conceptualised as fluid and easy movement in and out (and with) of spaces (digital and otherwise) (Collier & Perry, 2021). This was particularly relevant in the changes to how children were playing and interacting, including storytelling and making. Rowsell and colleagues (2023) note that 'young people gather, assemble, and entangle stories from popular culture, media, and lived experiences to design multimodal compositions' (pg. 632). What we take from this work for our own reflexive engagement on children's on- and off-line play in this chapter is the attention to the multiple histories and texts entangled within children's play, shifting seamlessly from digital to non-digital. This is not even a case of 'shifting', but of simultaneity.

So these easy, seamless, shifts 'across, through and beyond' (Jones, 2015) digital and non-digital spaces, make way for what Cannon and colleagues (2023) conceptualise as 'transludic' in sudden, new, home contexts:

> An assemblage of transludic practices takes account of the unusual formation of pandemic time, space and social relations experienced by many families as they negotiated and adjusted to new domestic arrangements through play and film production. (pg. 2).

To sum up, we are concerned that the learning loss discourse locks adult and policy attention on children's relative absence from the usual locations, institutions, routines and schooling practices of pre-pandemic (Western) childhood. In doing so it obscures our view of what children actually did during the pandemic, and the productive identity work they engaged in via complex embodied, cognitive and affective entanglements ranging across and between dynamic digital and non-digital spaces of the pandemic. The historian of childhood, Hendrick, writes:

> Scholars who deny that children have a voice or see them as passive figures against the backdrop of adult life, will fail to ask relevant questions relating to their presence and, therefore, will exclude them from history. (Hendrick, 2008, p. 46).

In the spirit of this, our small-scale study seeks to address this idea of the 'failure' to ask relevant questions of children's everyday playful identity practices during the pandemic. It provides space for our own children to guide us towards more pertinent exploration of their lived experiences and experimentation and to include children's own perspectives in the unfolding writing of the histories of COVID19.

Methodological approach

Our approach to exploring children's identity exploration in and out of digital spaces during various phases of the COVID19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, combined autoethnography and family ethnography (Olusoga & Bannister, 2023). Autoethnography is 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)' (Ellis, Adams and Boucher, 2011, p. 273). It is a methodology that is 'historically, culturally, and personally situated' (Kennedy and Romo, 2013, p. 113 citing Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1028). This makes it pertinent for research focused on child and family experiences in COVID when the nature of human and more-than-human entanglements within the home and within and across digital spaces, intensified for most people. Taking an interpretivist-humanistic approach (Adams and Manning, 2015) to family ethnography, our data generation for this study was discursive and visual. It built on an earlier project in which parent-child dyadic informal conversations were supported with visual provocations of images and artefacts our families had produced during from Covid times (Olusoga and Bannister, 2023) to prompt retrospective reflections on the events between the Spring of 2020 and the end of 2022. This current study involved ourselves - as researchers and parents - and our youngest children, who share an interest in a range of digital devices and platforms and in self-expression, both in online and offline spaces. Having gained ethical approval from our institution for our research, our study took the following shape.

In 2023 we undertook a series of informal reflective dyadic conversations (video recorded using Google Meet). In the first of these both authors shared stories of our families' digital and non-digital place and leisure practices during 2020 to 2022. We produced transcripts of these conversations in order to identify a range of digital non-digital practices, resources, events, roles and identities that emerged from these discussions. We then conducted parent-child informal dyadic conversations with our respective youngest children (now thirteen and eleven). These were audio-recorded with transcripts made. During the conversations, the children were gently prompted to share their memories of their digital and non-digital play and leisure experiences between 2020 and 2022.

Yamada-Rice (2017, p. 74) argues that 'researchers should foremost think of the research environments of young children as visual and sensory places' (p. 74). The availability and ease of use of digital technologies, she points out, 'have propelled the use of images as a means of collecting and disseminating information in both everyday and academic practices' (Ibid, p. 72). To support our data generation process, the children were also invited to select and discuss any relevant digital images/screenshots and material artefacts our families have from that time. During the discussions, they and we reflected on how they had creatively expressed and represented themselves and their identities during this period, in practices including modes of dress and personal appearance, avatar creation, photography, writing and messaging. They were asked to consider the relationships, interests and experiences that they had found meaningful and engaging and that they drew on at that time, for example, films, television, books, music, videogames, toys and engagement with youth/activity groups outside of the home. At the end of the conversations, if they wanted to, the children shared a small selection of this digital or material collection that they felt illustrates what was important to them and their identity expression in 2020-2022.

As this research involves digital family ethnography (Winarnita, 2019), both authors reflected on the wider familial and societal contexts within which our children's practices were unfolding . We thought reflexively about how we and our family relationships and practices had influenced and responded to the events our children recounted. We were mindful that in these conversations we and they were looking back at our younger selves. In memory, we cannot reproduce exactly the standpoint of that younger self, but we can attempt, figuratively, to stand alongside them, to (re)consider and take stock of past experiences from our slightly distanced perspective. We have drawn on our dyadic conversations to identify a series of vignettes focusing on particular playful activities undertaken by the two children, and to consider joint reflection on them by all four of us, which we present in the data section below.

'Living at work'

To us, as academics working at home and caring for our families, the pandemic, and the blurring work-life balance, felt less like working from home and more like 'living at work' (Olusoga & Bannister, 2023, p. 401). I (Jessica) remember feeling high levels of frustration at needing to leave my children to their own devices (figuratively and literally) for what seemed like long periods of time, as I taught, attended meetings or undertook other work-related activities. This was, in part, a frustration that I wanted to understand more about what my children were doing and how they were responding to the changes, but the already 'too blurred' context and wanting to preserve something of a boundary between my work and my

family meant I was actively resisting turning my home into a research project. At the same time, we were all coming to terms with these ‘smaller worlds’ and the intensity of these smaller worlds in the everyday and banal (Bradley, 2020). My own research is ethnographic, and I explore creative engagements with the everyday, for example in how people experience multilingualism in public space (Bradley & Atkinson, 2020). I was also, with colleagues, including Yinka, co-leading a project which focused on children’s engagements with a storytelling app (Parry & Bradley et al., 2020-2022, AHRC-XR Stories), and found the split between needing to oversee ethnographic research with families, which was severely limited due to COVID19 restrictions, and being able to spend time with my children as they explored digital spaces a source of some anxiety. However, I did continue to document everyday life in the home, including sharing on social media the small-scale creative activities we collectively engaged with, linking to general cultural shifts towards banana bread, Cosmic Kids yoga, Animal Crossing, and daily dog walking through the fields.

As a historian and play researcher, I (Yinka) remember feeling that my personal and professional identities were under pressure of collapse, merging into a singularity like the centre of a black hole. I was ‘embedded at home, the epicentre of childhood and play research in Covid times, watching it emerge before my eyes’ (Olusoga and Bannister, 2023, pp. 403-4). I became a co-lead on the ESRC-funded *Play Observatory* project, researching children’s play during the pandemic. Working from home meant that my children observed my work and were drawn into it. Both wanted to contribute ideas to the design of the project and chose to contribute to the survey (to differing extents) some of their own examples of play that was meaningful to them. In addition to this professional research I followed my long held ‘instinctive urge to record family history’ (Ibid, p. 403). I documented everyday life in photographs I took and discussed the images (photographs, screenshots, videos), taken by my children of their activities, and brought together in our shared Apple Photo Stream, which Levi, my youngest child (who has chosen his own pseudonym), and I returned to in our dyadic conversation from the perspective of 2023.

Trans-spatial, trans-media conversations

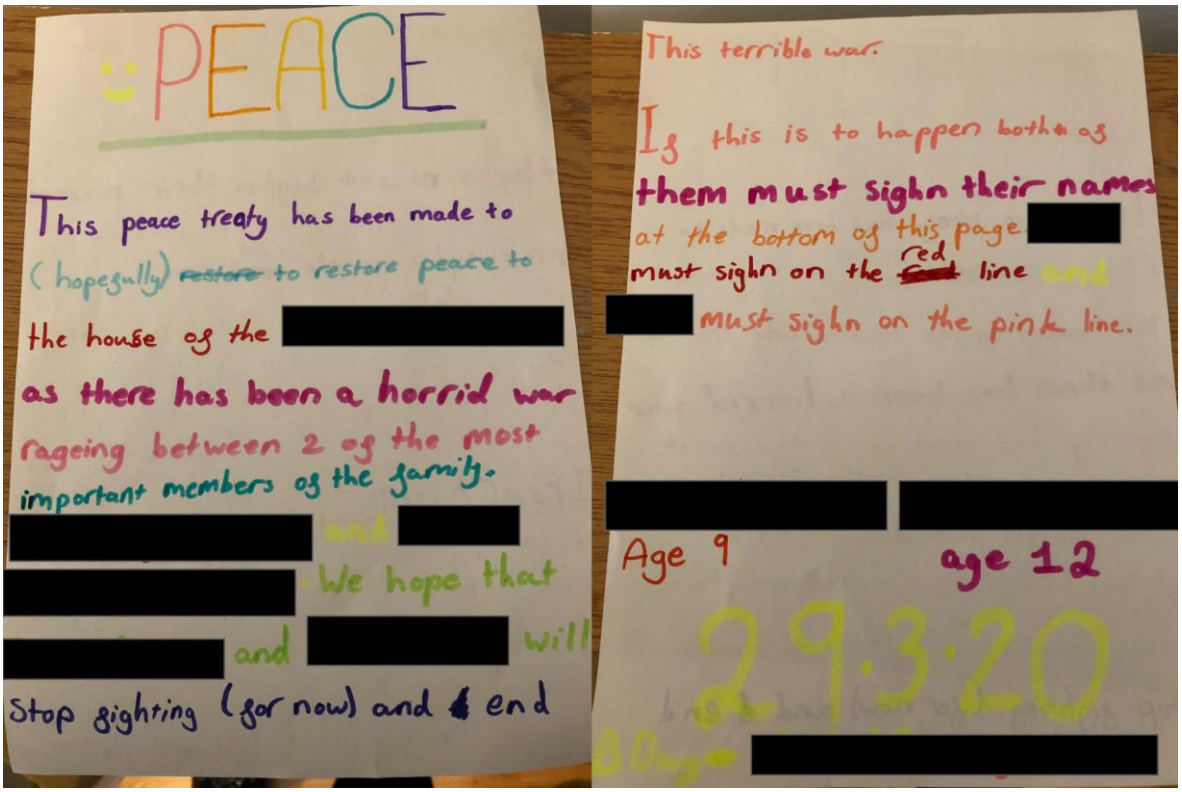
Star Wars/Marvel Mashups: Intertextuality and navigating the spaces of Covid life

My (Yinka’s) family started lockdown on Monday 16th March 2020, a week earlier than the rest of the UK, as my husband and I were both ill with increasingly incapacitating Covid symptoms. My work as an academic ‘pivoted online’; a deceptively uncomplicated term that masked hours of online training on the interactive use of virtual learning platforms, the hurried re-writing of teaching materials, and reconfiguring of module assessments. My husband also worked from home, for the company that runs the U.K.’s national broadband network. His work was intense, supporting the demands for broadband connectivity associated with the switch to home working for millions of people, but also the construction of the communications infrastructure for the series of ‘Nightingale hospitals’ being established by the government at the time, intended to take Covid patients. Having two very preoccupied parents meant that our children spent the early weeks of lockdown very intensely in each

other's company, learning to adjust to this series of new realities. Unsurprisingly, tensions and bickering ensued.

Clone Wars and the Peace Treaty

It's the afternoon of Sunday 29th March 2020, and my children have entered the dining room (which in lockdown doubles as my office and teaching space that I seem to be working in seven days a week at the moment). They show me something they have written together. It's a peace treaty, written in colourful felt tip and highlighter pen on A4 paper. At the top of the document is a smiley face and the label 'PEACE'. The main text sets out the history of the recent conflict between them and the agreement for a cessation of hostilities. The language is formal but also humorous, with use of qualifying language ('hopefully' and 'for now', that make the agreed upon terms not too onerous) and formal, legalistic conventions (use of full names and the requirement to sign and date the document). Pleased with their work, they pose for a photograph holding up their peace treaty, before I place it on the fridge where it remains until November 2023.



The Peace Treaty, 29th March 2020 (names and dates redacted)

Looking at the image in 2023, my son Levi tells me how the peace treaty came to be. He brought the idea for it to his older sister. His inspiration was the Star Wars series *The Clone Wars*, which he had been watching on Disney+ since I had purchased the new streaming service for our family the day it launched in the U.K. (a week earlier than planned) on Tuesday 24th March 2020. He explains:

Levi: “I noticed that these few episodes where it would be about this um planet, Mandalore, and all the people of Mandalore and how most of them have become a peaceful, happy people whilst the rest of them were exiled to be... are exiled to continue being themselves to continue being their culture’s old ways, of these violent and destructive bunch. So I thought because me and Anya [this is a pseudonym] had a lot of arguments we could create a peace treaty.”

Yinka: So, how did you feel when you were doing this? Did you bring this up and suggest this?

Levi: Yeah, I mean my sister thought it would probably be funny.

Yinka: Yeah, so it was a bit of taking an idea…but was it also a good chance to talk about.. . .

Levi: The issues. . .

Yinka: . . . the issues and the fights, yeah. And did it help?

Levi: Yeah for a long time. Yeah, I'm pretty sure you noticed

Recreating Asgard: Entanglements of Norse Myths, Virtual Reality and the Marvel Cinematic Universe
It’s Sunday 25th October 2020, and Levi is about to step into a whole new reality. Having volunteered to take part in a research project run by some of my (Yinka) colleagues, he has taken delivery of an Oculus headset and is experiencing virtual reality for the first time. On Monday 26th October I purchase the VR game Tilt Brush, which allows you to paint with light in 3-D. A couple of weeks later, still in his pyjamas, wearing the headset and holding the hand controllers, Levi is exploring Tilt Brush. Over previous days he has observed his older sister experimenting with the game, painting a garden, dominated by a huge pink blossom tree. She has explained how to operate the paintbrush and palette. He enters the black space of the game and begins painting with light, and continues to work at this over the coming days. His self-chosen mission is to create in 3-D the fictional world of Asgard [the dwelling place of the gods in Norse mythology].

In our 2023 conversation about his early experiences with VR, I ask Levi what inspired him to paint a virtual reality version of Asgard:

Levi: Well, Marvel Comics, I'd say and Marvel movies, of course. And also my genuine love for Norse mythology.

Yinka: Mmm… was that when you were starting to read the um… Neil Gaiman *Norse Myths* book? [I purchased the e-book with audio narration for Levi on 7th November 2020]

Levi: Which you gave to me.

Yinka: Yeah, you seemed to really enjoy those stories didn't you? So I think you were listening to that audiobook, weren't you?

At the beginning of the pandemic, Levi was an ardent fan of the DC comic universe, whilst his sister was starting to dabble in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Reflecting on these changes, Levi observes:

Levi: I'd been a DC fan for so long, but I noticed… I constantly noticed a particular problem. They don't really care for all ages, they only care to… they only catered for like people way older than me to have the DC comics. And DC is so mild and bland, it… it's just good guys shakedown bad guys, or you know just like sometimes the DC Comics can be really of um… can just be that …it can be depressing..

Yinka: Yeah, they can be quite dark, can't they?

Levi: Yeah and all violence and I just felt like all the characters were just really vile and just generally horrible people. But in Marvel… don't get me wrong, most of the guys are flawed in their personalities, but they're just genuinely… they're more than that. They're more than just… more than just a bunch of goodies taking down baddies. Sometimes they even, like, get annoyed at each other. Sometimes it's comedy, sometimes it's tragedy, sometimes it's romance. Like… sometimes the good guys will be absolutely happy with each other, and just really happy, and other times they'll be sad and annoyed at each other...

Yinka: And obviously there's another link, isn't there, to Asgard and Norse stuff in Marvel. What's that?

Levi: There's um… like a lot of characters in Asgard, and like…something that's just great about, like… is the Marvel Norse Gods… not all of them are accurate, some of them are incredibly inaccurate to the actual mythology, but they're still good. They're still pretty great characters…as you know in the MCU, in nearly every single MCU movie Asgard is just connected by some Observatory looking place.. . It's sort of the gateway where Heimdal is just standing there... But in Norse mythology, it's all connected to this one tree that sends. . . and instead of it being this magical portal that can send you anywhere, it just sends you straight to earth.

Yinka. Right. Okay.

Levi: So like I just used this giant tree model that had already been made by someone else. And just hooked at it straight into the sea.

Discussing the characters that inhabit Asgard, Levi explains that his favourite god is Balder, the god of light. He also discusses the Marvel characterisation of the brother gods, Thor and Loki, and reflects on similarities between their sometimes fractious relationship and his own relationship with his sister:

Levi: In the MCU, I noticed that the way they argue is just very similar to the way me and my sister argue. Yes, just family arguments, family being things that irritate a family, just taken to the literal extreme.

Yinka: Yeah, yeah, but then they always… when the other one needs them…

Levi: Yeah, they do always. . . completely do come to each other when …

Yinka: Yeah, they do always come through for each other. Do you think you and your sister do that?

Levi: I feel like, yeah.

Journey to Forbidden Planet: Becoming a Comic Book Kid

It's Saturday 7th May 2022, and the family is taking a trip into town. The central focus of the day will be Levi's first visit to a comic book store. He has come across the concept of the comic book store via various mentions in popular culture and is keen to become initiated. In episodes of *The Simpsons* that he has streamed, he has encountered the character Comic Book Guy and via *The Big Bang Theory* he has followed the adventures of the four male leads who frequent a comic book store run by their friend Stuart and are avid collectors and cosplayers involved in a number of fandoms. Levi takes care over his appearance today, wearing his long hair loose, pulling on black jeans and a black long-sleeved t-shirt, over which he fastens his most fashion-conscious item - a tight-fitting hand-me-down designer vest given to him that summer when his uncle and aunt cleared their loft. His final adornment is his Dr Strange (an MCU character) pendant.

The visit goes well. With the family in attendance, and all of us wearing facemasks, Levi explores the two levels of the shop, examining the comic books in the basement (where I try to hide my anxiety about the lack of ventilation) and the toys, costumes and figures for sale on the ground floor. He eventually selects two comic books, queues and pays for them. Returning home he excitedly asks for a photograph to mark the occasion. I snap some pictures of him proudly holding up his two Marvel comic books - *Thor: The Complete Collection* and *Loki of Asgard* - and we share them in the family WhatsApp chat, announcing his arrival as a fully fledged 'comic book kid'.

Levi, still dressed on from his comic book store visit, posing with his Thor and Loki comic books

I ask the now thirteen-year-old Levi, why eleven-year-old Levi was so keen to visit the comic book store for the first time and he explains:

> **Levi:** I just felt like it would be such a great idea. Just go to a comic book store and just get a comic, cos like not only did I like it, but also I liked reading it. I like watching the movies, I like reading them and it's just such a fun experience.
> **Yinka:** Mmm, because I mean you haven't particularly liked reading before, like other types of literature, had you, really?
> **Levi:** Yeah
> **Yinka:** Well, you liked listening to the Norse Myths, the Neil Gaiman book, didn't you? But what was it about comic books that interested you?
> **Levi:** Just it's like a movie…it's like watching a movie but you're watching and you're able to see the actual images and you're able to interpret the voices, you're like able to say things in certain ways in your mind
> **Yinka:** Mmm, so perhaps you have a bit more control than you have when you're watching a movie. Yeah, that's interesting. So you like the idea that you can… it's your interpretation. That's interesting.

Prompting Levi for his memories of the actual visit, he provides this description:

> **Levi:** It was such like a weird kind of comic book store, it didn't just sell comics, it sold like all kinds of merchandise and all kind of things. Especially Funko Pops.
> **Yinka**: Yeah.
> **Levi:** Those were the main focus of the shop and the left hand part of it. But in the basement there were many comics, so many different comics, and it was just amazing. . .

Yinka: . . . And do you remember when you bought it, how did you pay for? Where…who did you buy it from?
Levi: Well, this is actually pretty cool. Well, it's probably not cool for anyone else, but for me, it was kind of cool. I um… the first person at the cash register to give me my first comic book was this nice young man, called um… I can't remember what his name was, but he had this Japanese kind of inspired Green Goblin costume. And it was so weird being given a comic book… it was a very like nice community though.
Yinka: Mmm. And did you feel like you were becoming part of something, then?
Levi: Yeah.
Yinka: And in the shop, did you like the fact that the person had dressed up? And you'd dressed up a bit as well.
Levi: Yeah, the original plan was that I'd dress up like that just to get maybe a discount so I wouldn't have to pay that much, but I think it kinda grew on me

A new skatepark, Minecraft, IPads and walking to get coffee: setting and disrupting routines

I (Jessica) remember very clearly the days in the run-up to the announcement of lockdown in the UK. I was undertaking research fieldwork for a project I was leading which explored young people's experiences of multilingualism in public space in Manchester (Bradley, 2019-2021). This involved me travelling from my home city in West Yorkshire to Manchester by train every Monday, alongside my research collaborator, an artist-researcher. Together we were leading creative arts workshops in a secondary school, including print-making, zines, and collaging, and as the weeks progressed and COVID19 began to dominate news channels, these ordinary and mundane practices of travelling by public transport and creative collaboration somehow shifted in how we perceived them. I reflected on this in a blog post in June 2020:

> 'In the classroom I begin to be conscious of the surfaces we're all touching. The workshop is built to be collaborative – the art processes and the resultant artworks are shared. We share the rollers, the trays, the inks. We pick up each other's artworks to appraise and assess them. We pass round the paper workbooks and pens and pencils. It requires close working, the students sit in small groups and work with each other. At the end of the workshop Louise and I wash up each tray, each roller. I wonder about traces of different hands on each item. It's not something I've considered before, at least never more than superficially. Invisible traces left by hands on the art materials seem symbolic of the nature of creating artworks together, of collective creativity. But it seems that the collaborative nature of the workshops we're doing, the 'onto-epistemology of the research', as we might describe it in an academic publication, means our practice, ordinarily mundane, is now potentially risky.' (Bradley, 2020).

COVID19 meant that the workshops had to stop early and we finished a week before the national lockdown began. My husband and I decided to remove our own two children from primary school a couple of days before the official announcement, around the same time that my university teaching 'pivoted' online. My husband is deputy head of a primary school in a

neighbouring city, and so, although in the early days of the national lockdown he remained at home while decisions were made about how schools were to proceed in this context, he returned swiftly to school whilst our children and I stayed at home. Like Yinka and her partner, we were particularly preoccupied and concerned.

Whilst Yinka's reflections about a comic shop visit are from towards the end of the pandemic period, my own comic shop memories relate to those very early weeks, when I had started to feel extremely anxious about the international situation unfolding in China, Italy and beyond. Yinka and I realised, in discussing these excursions, that we had visited the same comic shop in Leeds city centre, as something of a rite of passage for our pre-teen children. This particular shopping trip in March 2020 had stayed in my mind as the national lockdown started, including the sensations of sharing air and touching hard surfaces in the city centre:

> The previous weekend, 8th March, I had taken my eldest daughter to buy shoes to wear for my youngest sister's forthcoming wedding in April (subsequently postponed). We try on shoes and dresses in John Lewis, we have cake in the cafe, and later we have pancakes in a hipster coffee shop by the station. We browse the comic shops and ask the shop assistants to help us find manga comics for pre-teens and they show us the categories applied to books so we know what to look for. But I have the feeling of shopping at the end of the world and suddenly want to be home fast. We catch the train and for the next few days I go over the things we've both touched, the ticket machines in the station, the communal water jug in the cafe, the comic books we opened and then put back on the shelves, the shop doors, the taps in public toilets. My eldest daughter often explores through touch, trailing her hands across surfaces, shop counters, clothing rails, stone walls, railings. I wonder how much invisible virus is soaking up onto her hands and spreading through her fingers. During the last two summers in Spain when we walked more slowly and looked at things (as holidaymakers do, as ethnographers do when they're not too busy rushing) we watched as her fingertips trailed the different textures of buildings as she walked. We didn't think of a virus then, instead I worried about stray rusty nails or sharp edges cutting into her fingers. (Bradley, 2020)

Skate park/carpark

During the early periods of the national lockdown, one daily walk was permitted. At this time we were also aware of friends in Spain with young children, who had been unable to leave their house at all, while those with dogs were allowed to walk them. My children discussed the various injustices of these rules, though we feel somewhat smug perhaps that if this happened here we could still walk our dog, Bowie (a pseudonym chosen by my youngest daughter). We, with Bowie, would take our daily walk left from our house, under the railway bridge (named 'spooky bridge junior', also by my youngest child), along the underpass and to the park and meadows beyond the railway line. Our walk - which usually included an assemblage of bike, scooter - would usually take the same route, down by the stream, around the playground, up through the woods, and sometimes under 'spooky bridge senior', the longer, darker, and more pigeon-filled bridge further up into the park. We would then walk back along the main road and past the car showroom, now emptied of cars and with an enticing, flat concrete space, perfect for scooters and bikes. We would be often joined there by other families on various wheels, all with the same idea. We would

keep a distance apart and catch up, while the children scooted, skated, and cycled round and round where the new, shiny cars used to be. The pop-up skatepark, it turns out, was only fleeting, and forever linked in my own mind with the mild weather and sunshine which also characterised those early lockdown weeks. My youngest daughter, Luna (who has chosen her own pseudonym), inspired by the rainbow flag-making we've been joining in with, makes a protest flag featuring a car with a red cross over it: 'She's outraged that our skatepark has been taken away, who even wants to buy a car right now, she argues, but lots of people want to skate! She wants to campaign, to start a demonstration' (Bradley, 2020).

This spatial disruption and reclaiming of space was also a feature inside the home. At that time our house included an open-plan kitchen/playroom/dining room, with a separate living room and playroom/study. As we settled in to our different routines, each of us would occupy a different area of the house, usually with me stationed in the dining area, locked out of my study, which also worked as the children's playroom, unless I made a specific claim on it due, for example, to a viva or a confidential meeting. Minecraft featured heavily in these early days, with Luna and her sister, Rose (pseudonym), building elaborate lands and houses, sometimes together and sometimes alone.

> **Jessica:** Can you remember the first few weeks and when the school closed and you weren't able to go in, what kinds of things you were doing at home?
>
> **Luna:** I played Minecraft
>
> **Jessica**: And what kinds of things were you doing on Minecraft?
>
> **Luna:** Making lands and stuff
>
> **Jessica:** What kinds of lands?
>
> **Luna**: Mainly I'd play on survival mode and make houses
>
> **Jessica**: What's survival mode?
>
> **Luna**: It's where you, like, you have to get all your materials or you die. If you don't have materials you need to get materials to be good. And then if you're good, then you can win - so you can't technically win Minecraft. Winning is when you beat the Enderdragon, but you can keep playing after that. But, basically, on survival mode you have to find all your materials and create
>
> **Jessica**: Can you remember, was Minecraft something that you started playing straight away?
>
> **Luna:** I played quite a bit before but I think I definitely played it more

Playing together in the same virtual lands and within the same physical four walls sometimes caused friction for Luna and her sister, and eventually they stopped playing together on Minecraft. A few months in, my eldest daughter had discovered a new virtual world in Animal Crossing (see https://animalcrossingdiaries.thenvm.org/entry/cute-isle/ for her description of

Cute Isle for the National Videogame Museum's Animal Crossing exhibition) and settled into playing that quite intensively, abandoning Minecraftian lands for the time being.

Luna's own play then shifted towards cooperation on Minecraft (and other games including Among Us and Roblox) with her school friends. This play centred on her iPad, through which she would 'group message' friends via a variety of different group combinations to ask 'can anybody call?'. The ringtone she selected was a duck quacking, and we referred to her gaming friends as 'the quackers'. Whoever signalled their availability would then move to a FaceTime call, on which they would chat together, including planning strategic moves, while simultaneously playing Minecraft on the same device.

> **Jessica**: So when you weren't playing with your sister, you were playing with your friends. How did you do that?
>
> **Luna:** We went on FaceTime. Yeah and then you'd go on to the same land…we join each other's worlds because you can have friends in Minecraft..we could talk on FaceTime and play in the game on the same device
>
> **Jessica**: Would you all join one person's world?
>
> **Luna**: One person would make a world and then everybody else would join…I remember one world called Spooky Mansion. So the seed is where you spawn. The seed was a spooky mansion which is an 'auto-seed' you can get so we would go in there a lot
>
> **Jessica:** And were you playing in survival mode?
>
> **Luna**: Yeah - and you could die. Yeah, we died a lot
>
> **Jessica**: But then did you go back to the same world after you died?
>
> **Luna:** Yeah, but you lose your stuff unless you're playing hardcore mode which we never did
>
> **Jessica**: And how did you combine that with doing schoolwork at home?
>
> **Luna**: So basically most of it I could do really quickly - I could do most of the day's work in a couple of hours. So the schoolwork took me maybe half of the school day. So then, a couple of hours before we would normally finish school, so maybe like 2 o'clock or 1.30, then we would all finish
>
> **Jessica**: And then you'd start texting each other?
>
> **Luna:** Yeah

Play and socialising with friends from her class, therefore, all centred on the iPad. The iPad facilitated connection, the iMessage conveying the more traditionally physical act of calling for a friend, with the 'are you playing' message, translated to 'can anyone call?', followed up by a FaceTime group call, in different configurations, and a negotiated agreement to join a particular world online. What is interesting to me, reflecting on this now for this book chapter, is how much this routine was a feature of lockdown life, whilst now, in late 2023, it is noticeably absent.

‘Hello, could we have a break?’

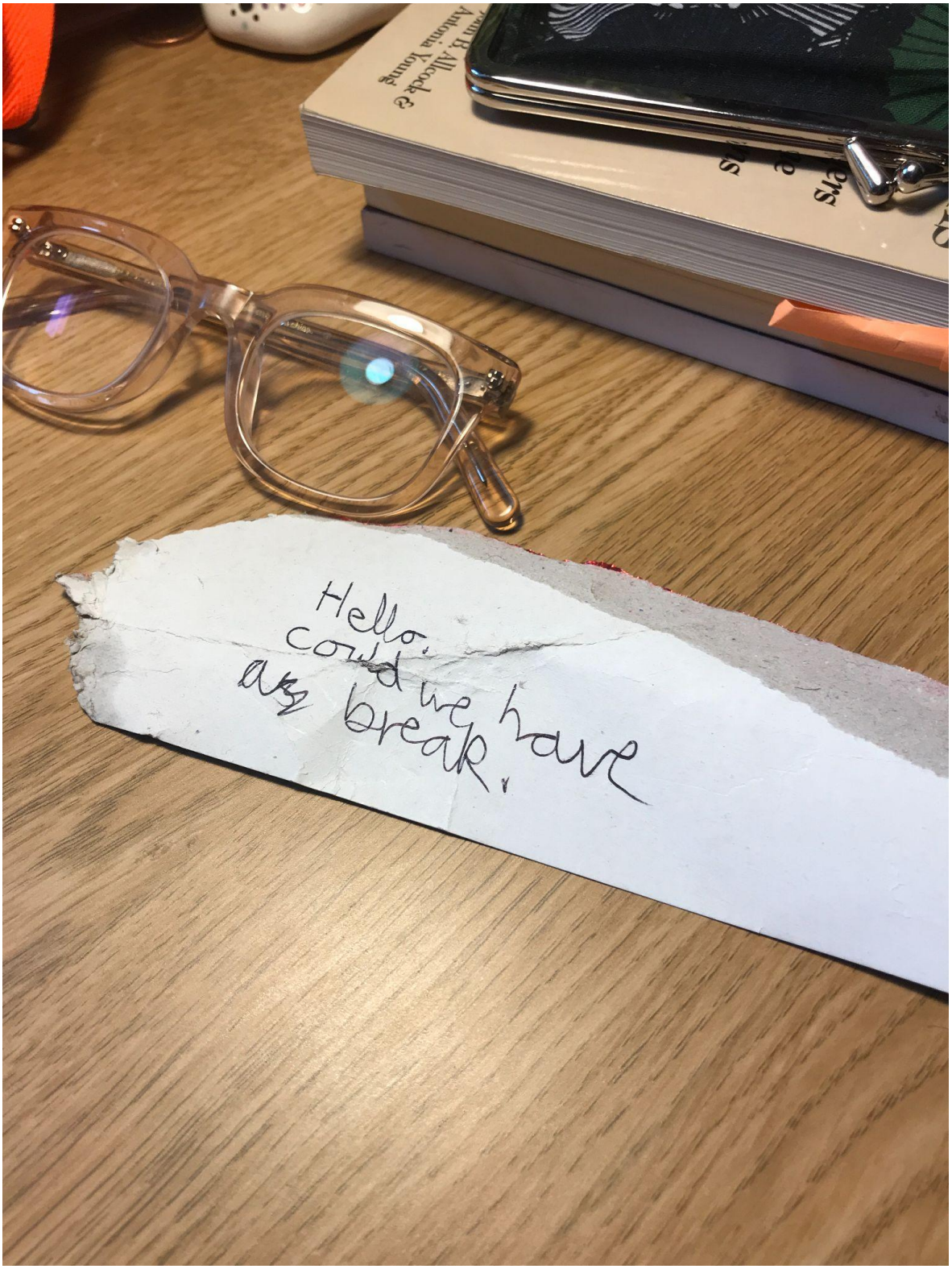


Image shows a handwritten note on a ripped piece of paper, ‘Hello, can we have a break.’

I examined two theses during the pandemic, giving me occasional legitimate claim on the contested space of our study/playroom. Our developing and shifting household rules included that the children were always able to get my attention if they needed it when I was

working, as long as they knew I would not always be able to react quickly. My students were used to my children being in the background and, as I was teaching a research methods module focused on researching with children, I often brought the two of them in to collaborate with me and give examples of their current play interests, including Minecraft and Animal Crossing. The only exception to this rule was when I was in a viva. The image shows a note delivered under the door by one of my children during one such event, both of whom had understood that this was a time when ideally I could not be disturbed.

> **Luna:** Ok…yeah we could go to [name of coffee shop] every morning after the school 'Teams' call. I remember. And then I would rush to do my Maths quickly
>
> **Jessica**: Yeah, so you'd have the 'Zoom' [here I'm mixing up platforms] call at the beginning, that was in September 2020. No, that was in January 2021!
>
> **Luna**: So then they started doing a Zoom [also mixing up platforms] at, I don't know what, 8:30 or something. And then after we did the call we would go to [name of coffee shop] with the dog

As quickly as new regimes bedded in, in the early months of the pandemic, a partial return to school in September 2020, characterised by repeated bubble bursts, followed by another national lockdown in January 2021, meant continuous change and new routines. I asked Luna what she could remember about daily life at that time and we both became confused in terms of when each different 'phase' took place. In the January 2021 - March 2021 lockdown, cafes and other services were open. Each day, around mid-morning, the three of us and Bowie the dog would walk through the meadows to a local coffee shop in the city centre. I would typically order a flat white, and the girls would have hot chocolates or custom-made milkshakes, depending on the temperature. Bowie would always have a treat from the dog treat jar. I remember it as a highlight of our day during a particularly monotonous and wintry period.

Image of our morning walks through the meadows to the coffee shop (January 2021)

Reflections

For me (Yinka), these reminiscences trigger a bubbling up of parental guilt at my 'neglect' of my children during those initial weeks of lockdown when illness and work kept me preoccupied. However, there is also a bubbling up of admiration and pride in the capacity for Levi's innovative re-direction and reworking of ideas from digital space to solve real world issues, and for the reflection, negotiation and reconciliation demonstrated in the co-construction by Levi and his sister of the Peace Treaty. In his VR (re)creation of Asgard in Tilt Brush, Levi was able to assemble a rich collection of cultural and digital resources to support his digital art. These reflect his burgeoning interest in Norse myths, and (for him) the seismic shift from fandom in the DCU to the MCU. His critique of both is considered and contextualised within his awareness of generational structure and the complexities of human identities, fictional and real life. His articulation of the ways in which the MCU's strength of storytelling and nuanced construction of characters, entertain and inform his reflection on his own relationships, particularly that with his sibling. The detail with which Levi remembers his first comic book store visit surprises me, and its significance to him as a rite of passage far exceeds what I had understood at the time. From a parental perspective, my eagerness for Levi to experience buying comic books was also informed by my growing anxiety at his general lack of interest in most other forms of reading (the sole exception before this being his avid reading and re-reading of the Neil Gaiman book, *Norse Myths*). In my myopic reading of the event I had failed to notice the other elements of his cultural and visual literacy, as witnessed in his clothing and appearance and his 'reading' of the material cultures and fandoms present in the shop. The visit was both an opening up for us as a family, after COVID, but also a portal opening up new forms of media and identity expression for Levi.

I (Jessica) also feel considerable parental guilt when remembering the notes that the children would sometimes leave me when I had asked not to be disturbed, for example the viva event I mention above. However, it was interesting when talking to Luna about these early pandemic months, which seem so far in the past for her now, to hear what she could and could not remember, and what she did and did not want to talk about. Luna's online play, on and through her iPad enabled her to keep in close contact with her friends from school, giving a shared language to the digital call to digital play, as well as being able to share experiences and build together in Minecraft worlds, at a time when they could not share a classroom. These digital spaces - the FaceTime call, combined with the Minecraft play -were of paramount importance to Luna at that time. She would rush to finish any school work so that she could 'call'. Yet, interestingly, our outdoor explorations - to the 'skatepark', the meadows, and the coffee shop - were more immediately recalled for Luna than the cultural and play-based activities she was engaging in through her IPad. Perhaps the sense of disrupted space the 'skatepark' gave us, and the feeling of doing something that was possibly forbidden, foregrounds it in our collective family memory. The individual walks through the meadows for coffee, of course, fade into one long memory of a walk.

The experience of undertaking this collaborative writing project enabled an unexpected unlocking of specific memories of the banal, of the everyday at a time of unprecedented events. We echo the argument from Cannon et al (2023, p. 1) that 'play with media forms' and 'cultural material generated by children is an important post-pandemic legacy' worthy of continued research. It gives adults and children alike the opportunity to come to value the

place of popular cultural knowledge in children's creative and identity expressions and exploration, and to appreciate the dexterity of their riffing on personal, familial and societal ideas in the transludic flows of this activity, in and out of digital spaces. It opens up an expanded conceptualisation of what counts as important and productive literacy practices inside and outside of home and school.

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