Playing around on Zoom. The Intersection of Imaginary Play with Technology

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The author investigates the imaginative play of children online as they seek a common, shared space with others, in which to play. She looks at components of children's online play experiences, including mediated actions, discourses, literacies, sense of belonging, and online restrictions as they moved between digital and nondigital realities. She discusses the future implications of such play—the possibilities of online play groups within other social contexts such as home-schooling communities, hospitals, public schools, and libraries. Finally, she explores group dynamics such as gender and multiculturalism within online play groups. **Key words***:* digital play; discourses; literacies; online play groups

Introduction

Play is a fundamental component of children's daily lives. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable decline of free-play opportunities for children in recent years (Digennaro 2021; Gray, Lancy, and Bjorklund 2023). As we embark on a new era in which children are immersed in technology through online schooling, video games, and social media, play is the one thing that remains constantly craved by children (Sutton-Smith 1997). And with easy digital access and ample technological options—the gateways of computers, tablets, and phones—connections to social media and virtual platforms have opened an "ever-expanding digital frontier changing the way in which children play… creating multimodal forms of play" (Horrace 2021, 78).

Purpose of the Study

As children share in virtual worlds and explore similar interests, bonding over familiar toys and characters, they are viewed as collaborators, creators, and coconstructors (Marsh et al. 2016; Piaget 1951; Wohlwend 2011a). However,

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adults create typical online environments for children, and the games they construct have specific end goals that do not allow creativity and imaginary play in the same way in-person play groups foster children's imagination and free-play experiences (Horrace 2023). Therefore, my purpose in this qualitative case study was not to investigate children's imaginative play in the traditional in-person interactions but rather to explore the interplay developed in online spaces through Zoom that I call "online imaginative play groups," spaces in which children mediate shared discourses and literacies and demonstrate their digital understanding through their pivots in actions and their reenactments of favorite storylines from their most beloved toys and media.

Local Context

To understand the local context of online imaginative play groups, I begin by redefining local. Typically, when we think of local, we think of a particular area or neighborhood, perhaps even a town or community. However, my research expands the definition of local with the use of technology by converting distant interactions into a common, shared space, truly examining the parallels of children's play worlds along with the connections they make surrounding favorite toys, media, and stories. As Horrace and Wohlwend (2023) write: "No longer must we be physically local to be *locally present* as we interact with one another"(55).

During the spring of 2021 and the fall of 2022, I hosted four play groups that consisted of children ranging in age from six through eleven with a mix of boys and girls across the United States. I found the children through shared connections such as a large Midwestern university, Facebook homeschooling groups, and friends of friends. Although the children resided in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, and Washington, the Zoom room bridged their physical space with a local, digital context during these hour-long, weekly play group sessions.

Children's Media: LEGO Ninjago

As I considered which media source to use for my online imaginative play groups, I evaluated what parents want from appropriate children's television and attempted to balance that with what children crave and desire. I did not want to make the safe choice by selecting media believed to be educational but rather to

choose a show more contested by societal norms and holding little educational value or merit, mainly to highlight the difference between the choices of parents and those of children. Using my children as a guide, I decided immediately on the media that would be part of my study: *Ninjago*.

Ninjago is an animated children's show about LEGO ninjas, each with his or her own earthly power, such as the elements of water, fire, and earth. The ninjas each have a corresponding color to such power (i.e., the red ninja's power is fire) and use this power only to fight an enemy because the *Ninjago* ninjas are perceived as the good guys. The story takes place in an undisclosed country in the fictional city of Ninjago, with no reference to a specific location. However, the setting has been heavily debated in online forums, including among the children during my study. The *Ninjago* storyline follows a very good-guy-versus-bad-guy theme, "proving," as Mattes (2019) writes, "that love, rather than violence, resolves the tensions upon which the narrative is built" (82).

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from mediated discourse theory, my research was able to evaluate interaction, storying, and tensions across trajectories, creating intersections among converging discourses and modes. It is through the perspective of mediated discourse theory that I examine patterns and connections in discourses to unify my research and further develop my data and analysis. This theoretical framework allowed me to shift my lens and expose new data, building on strategies and tactics through literacy, media, and imaginative play. A foreword written by David Howes in Mills (2016) shares that "texts are no longer static the way they were in the print era—they are interactive" (p. xiii). This perfectly highlights what I hoped to encompass in my research—the literary, interactive, action texts produced by children through their participation during online imaginative play groups.

Mediated Discourse Theory

Mediated discourse theory is a "framework for looking at actions with two questions in mind: What is the action going on here? And how does Discourse figure into these actions?" (Scollon 2001, 1). Using this frame, I look at the actions taking place during play while analyzing what discourses are present, either in the foreground or background, "approaching discourse through action," as

Jones (2014) would have it, to find its relevance and determine precisely what it is doing.

Looking at what children do during online imaginative play groups as they form affinity groups and become members of their own special social club, it is important to define discourses as a socially based group "acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the 'appropriate way' with the 'appropriate' props at the 'appropriate' times in the 'appropriate' places" (Gee 2011, 34). As discourses are discussed in terms of literacies, media, play, and technology, the distinction must be made in reference to the "'Big D' Discourses" (Gee 1990, 2011, 2015). I am researching and analyzing more than just a shared language but rather "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" (Boston University 1989, 18). Discourses cross fields and subjects and can include any type of members as long as they associate with that specific network, allowing the group to serve as an identity kit for their members and acceptance by others as it circulates throughout the community. When I refer to discourses throughout this article, I do so with the "'Big D' Discourse" of Gee (1990; 2015) in mind.

As children watch a familiar television show, will they then reenact their favorite storylines, or will they build upon the storyline, altering scripts, characters, and plot to fit into their known identities and cultures? As Wohlwend (2014) asked: "What are the cycles in and out of practices, materials, and discourses that come together in this moment?" (57), and what ordinary actions build upon the known literacies we use "to make sense of actions, materials, and spaces" (Wohlwend 2021, 4)?

Methodology

When many children shifted online due to the pandemic, I craved a better understanding of what was taking place in children's lives and across their play landscapes. As an observational researcher, the ethnographic design choice suited my study, giving me the ability to immerse myself into the children's culture of play. I was able to experience what they were feeling, acting, and portraying as they played their way through the screen, acting out scenes from *Ninjago*, building castles with LEGO blocks, candidly finding connections and patterns throughout their online imaginative play groups. Engaging in nexus analysis allowed

me to hone in on a very specific area and a smaller group of children to gather information more closely about the specific themes and patterns that emerged.

Nexus Analysis

I found it imperative to focus on the mediated actions of the players in my play group, which is why I selected a methodological approach that enabled me to pick apart the ordinary to find the extraordinary. Indeed, the "nexus analysis takes a laser focus on a mediated action—a small physical move that makes an object meaningful, sensible, or readable" (Wohlwend 2021, 258).

To gain an understanding of histories and cultural connections, I needed to explore important elements of the nexus analysis—historical bodies (Scollon 2001) and interaction orders (Goffman 1983). As I think about historical bodies in terms of the children in my play group, it was important to acknowledge that "different people play the same role differently depending on personal experience inscribed" (Scollon 2004). Having this understanding allowed me to appreciate that all children bring unique artifacts and views of playing with one another given the histories they experience. And these histories affect how we behave and interact with one another (Goffman 1983). In other words, the actions children take when they meet to discuss and play *Ninjago* become engrained, even expected, because they are enacting their interaction orders within their affinity group.

As I examined children's imaginative play, I zoomed in and out of their literacies as well as the discourses taking place within the nexus. Because children occupied an online site of engagement, nexus analysis enabled me to pay close attention to the mediated actions that occurred through social practices, cultural toys, familiar media, and so forth, looking to those connections that were creating a sense of belonging among players. What dialogue did children reference? What characters did they draw upon? What embedded stories did they explore? Using nexus analysis allowed me to situate myself as an observer to watch the microactions with an observational, magnified lens.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to beginning the research, I obtained permission from my university's Institutional Review Board, providing evidence to the review boards that my study design followed its guidelines for conducting ethical research as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). Because I was researching and recording children,

my study required "a thorough review; a process involving detailed, lengthy application; and an extended time for review" (151).

As I waited for approval to begin my research, I watched six episodes of *Ninjago*, the animated series, to develop an understanding of the characters, the dynamics, and plot. I then jumped ahead to see when a female ninja would be introduced, because the show's seasons opened only with male character leads. Not watching the episodes in order proved confusing because the show does follow a storyline, so I missed some references I needed. I backtracked and watched the first three seasons in order, consisting of thirty-four episodes. I still have not seen all fifteen seasons of this franchise.

Participant Recruitment

But once I had a vague understanding of *Ninjago*, I felt I could mediate play groups based on the series. I reached out to peers at my university courses who had expressed interest in my study and asked them if their children would like to participate. I contacted friends to pass along my invitations, and posted invitations on multiple Facebook groups, such as local homeschooling groups and military homeschooling groups, until I had interested enough players who consented to participate in my research study. I used pseudonyms for all the participants.

Participant Information

We held the 2021 sessions every Tuesday afternoon at 5:00 p.m. ET and met eighteen times, sixteen consecutive and two follow-up sessions, spaced weeks

Participant	Year	Age	Gender	Ninjago Fan	LEGO Fan	Parent Interview
Elsa	2022	6	Female	Yes	Partial	No
Harry	2021	8	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jackson	2021/2022	8/10	Male	Yes	Yes	No
Jane	2022	10	Female	No	Yes	Yes
Oliver	2021	10	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paul	2022	6	Male	Partial	Yes	Yes
Ryan	2022	6	Male	Yes	Yes	No
Steve	2022	6	Male	No	Yes	Yes
William	2021	9	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 1. Participants' information denoting children's names, ages, genders, identification as a fan, and parent participation in online interview

apart to catch up with one another. This play group's sessions began with the intention of getting together every other week, but the players were captivated by interacting with one another online, so—with parent approval—we quickly switched to weekly sessions. Initially, these sessions started with two players but grew to include two additional players, meeting for roughly sixty minutes, though some sessions lasted between eighty and one hundred minutes because the players enjoyed interacting.

The 2022 sessions were held on Saturday mornings at 11:00 a.m. ET and met seven times. The play group held gatherings once a week for roughly an hour, but some, again, lasted longer because the players enjoyed interacting. This play group's sessions consisted of five players, both male and female, ranging in age from six to ten years old. An additional member joined the first session, but he became overwhelmed by the online play group format and decided not to participate.

Setting the Stage

At the beginning of both play groups' sessions, I introduced myself and let the children know that I would be just off camera in case any issues arose but that this was their time to do what they wanted with one another and they did not need to ask me for permissions. I did suggest they introduce themselves to one another and share their interests and hobbies to help break the ice and become comfortable. I then transitioned to the role of silent, nonparticipant observer for the remainder of the Zoom play group sessions.

Play Group Tracking

I used Zoom video recordings of children's play groups for all the sessions held during spring 2021 and fall 2022. After each play group met, I used Google Docs to write up a short synopsis that included the date of the play group's session, the players, the themes that emerged, and a quick summary of key events. This offered a way to organize play groups systematically while also allowing me to keep track of the overarching themes that occurred among the groups (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2012).

Rich Observations

To situate myself better within my data and to aid in my analysis, I wrote observational field notes and a journal covering play group activity. Following the ethnographic fieldwork practices described by Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater

(2012), I focused not only on my own observations but also produced reflective pieces and exploratory writing that heightened my descriptions. I found that making observations and taking field notes especially came in handy in relation to technical issues, enabling me to provide rich descriptions of what I observed in the play groups.

Parent Conversations

As a method for triangulating and enriching my data, I spoke with the parents of children participating in the online imaginative play groups, which enabled me to seek patterns of thought and central themes and to help narrow my focus on data sources (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2012; Creswell and Poth 2018). Aslan and associates (Aslan et al. 2022) called communication between parents and teachers (or researchers) critical for online learning environments, which is why I felt speaking with the parents of my participants was not only a vital step for my research but also a way to keep everyone comfortable and well informed. After I reached out to all the parents, a total of six agreed to meet with me online (via Zoom) to chat about their children's participation in the play group and to share their thoughts regarding online play, technology use, LEGO sets, and so forth. We held meetings through Zoom that lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

Taking a semistructured approach, I included seven questions but remained open to parent's sparking new questions (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The discussions remained conversational to ensure parents felt comfortable and heard.

Data Analysis Procedure

A core principle of a nexus analysis lens insists that "there is always far too much to know for anyone to decide *a priori* what is important or relevant to the study at hand" (Scollon and Scollon 2007, 616). When I began my research, I had a few ideas about what to include, but I knew it would be "theoretically limiting to make such decisions in advance of becoming engaged in the actual research" (620), especially in a case study involving children who are constantly creative, unique, and generally surprising.

My analytical procedures relied on a combination of fieldwork for nexus analysis (R. Scollon 2001; S.W. Scollon 2004) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). After uploading all the play group videos from the cloud server

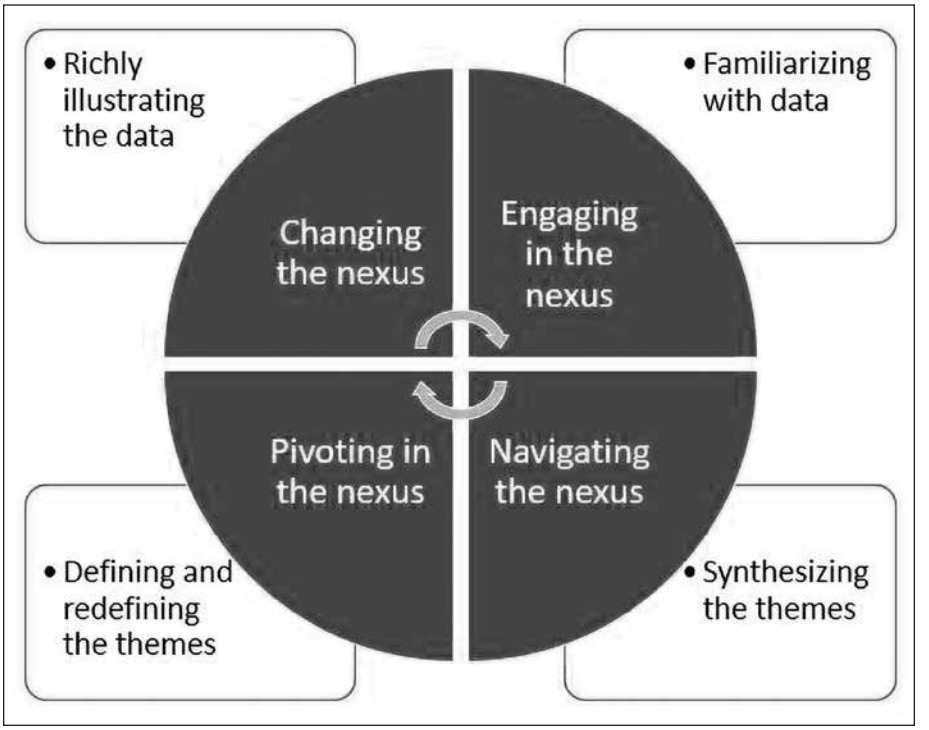

Figure 2. Combination analysis diagram that represents the blending of nexus analysis and thematic analysis methods used to guide data analysis procedures
Combination Data Analysis (Horrace 2023)

to my double authentication folder on my password-secured computer, I used coding and qualitative data analysis software to help annotate codes, find patterns, and focus in further on mediated actions, as I engaged, changed, and navigated the nexus of practice.

Using these two specific data analysis procedural methodologies, nexus analysis and thematic analysis, I was able to marry the collection and the analysis, the calm and the action. As I familiarized myself with the data, I recognized and identified the nexus of practice, established social issues and actors, observed interaction order, and established the zone of identification, all to help lay a foundation for understanding and familiarity (Scollon 2004; Wohlwend 2021). I then synthesized the themes, which allowed me to pinpoint the constant and important events and discourses occurring throughout the interactions.

Navigating the nexus was an important step to "map the cycles of the people, places, discourses, objects, and concepts which circulate[d] through this micro-semiotic ecosystem" of childhood imaginative play (Scollon 2004, 159). Moving to defining and redefining themes became key to my study because it enabled me to identify "the 'essence' of what each theme [was] about . . . and determin[e] what aspect of the data each theme capture[d]" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 92). A significant part of my findings, which became crucial to my data analysis, involved the heightened attention I needed to give to pivots in the players' actions during play group sessions. Traditionally, nexus analysis calls on the researcher to navigate and then change the nexus. I felt, however, there was something missing as I watched children's imaginary play unfold on the screen. These continuously occurring ruptures shaped my analysis for the better. Lastly, it was important to illustrate richly the data I had analyzed and to report my contributions as an ethnographic researcher and nexus analyst regarding the changes I contributed to the nexus.

Potential Ethical Issues Addressed

Paulus and Lester (2022) discussed potential ethical digital issues to include security of online recordings and video conferencing, secure storage solutions, and copyright issues with popular artifacts. One potential ethical issue I faced involved Zoom—I conducted both the play groups and parent interviews online rather than in person. An ethical issue the researchers often considered that directly related to my study questioned whether all parts of a digital interaction or recording, such as background voices, objects, and people, should be analyzed. Because the setting of the online imaginative play groups were in children's homes, oftentimes younger siblings, pets, and parents appeared and even talked in the background, sometimes even front and center on screen. This entanglement of background interactions can create richer discourses or possible tensions, both of which can interact and even complicate foreground actions of players in the play group (Wohlwend 2011b).

Another potential ethical issue related to my participant's status as minors. I needed to take extra precaution to protect their privacy and security. All of my participants, their parents, siblings, and teachers received a pseudonym not only during my findings but from the very beginning as I tracked play groups and analyzed data. Also, in the pictures and video segments I used for coursework

and in this study, I pixelated the faces of the players, limiting a very crucial element of play—facial expression.

My role as a nonparticipant observer of my participants in the play groups might create ethical issues because I merely observe children in their shared space and have no control or role in any decisions they make. Further, my own knowledge of *Ninjago* and LEGO building is fairly limited, which creates a disconnect between my own understanding of literacies, discourses, and cultural elements that the players instantaneously recognize and also appreciate.

Spring 2021 Play Group

The pandemic limited social play among children (Wohlwend 2023) because they were kept indoors, away from each other, and only visible through a screen because of the "massive closure of schools" (Aslan et al. 2022). But children needed a social outlet to engage with others, allowing them the opportunity to learn and explore by playing imaginatively with one another. As children (and parents) turned to online outlets, such as educational content and games, digital stories, and virtual worlds, children became immersed in premade environments as opposed to their usual playrooms. Such adult-constructed parameters can constrain children's imaginations and free play and confine their choices or abilities to explore and create (Wainer 2023). Furthermore, in a time when social distancing became the norm, it proved imperative to support outlets for socialization, especially those for children. Interacting with peers helps children solve problems, collaborate, and think critically (Stone 2016)—plus it is more fun! And since physically being together was off limits, a new opportunity for social time online emerged through online imaginative play groups in which children met once a week via Zoom to play with one another in an unstructured environment.

The 2021 play group sessions were thoroughly steeped in all things *Ninjago*. The boys discussed *Ninjago* episodes, played with their *Ninjago* LEGO sets, explored the LEGO website, battled their *Ninjago* builds, and much more. Due to their strong connection with the stories and histories of the ninja culture, as well as their mastery of *Ninjago* characters and LEGO sets, this affinity play group was named the Ninja Masters for coding purposes and ease of identification.

In the upcoming vignette, I breakdown one of the Ninja Masters' play group sessions (see figure 3) to demonstrate the children's expertise in actions

Session	*Actions*	*Literacies and/or Discourses Present*
1	• Show-and-tell • Shared affinity • Screen manipulation • Technology connection	• Toy, Media, and Digital Literacies • Media Discourses • Belonging
2	• Media vs. LEGO • Play vs. Build	• Media and Toy Literacies • Play and School Discourses
3	• Watching *Ninjago* • Weapon challenge	• Digital, Media, and Toy Literacies • Media Discourses • Belonging
4	• New location • Sibling intrusion • Cat embodiment	• Toy and Digital Literacies • Play Discourses • Embodiment
5	• New friends • Playing *through* the screen	• Toy and Digital Literacies • Play Discourses
6-8	• Watching *Ninjago* • Building LEGO • Storying • Surfing LEGO website • Disagreement	• Toy and Media Literacies • Media Discourses • Co-authoring • Remixing • Peer relationships, negotiations
9	• Rules—fairness/inclusion • Building competitions • Zoom Whiteboard	• Play and School Discourses • Digital literacies
10	• Real vs. Emoji pets • Zoom features	• Digital literacies • Belonging
11	• Ninja text • Collaboration	• Remixing • Peer relationships, collaboration, negotiations
12	• Virtual *Ninjago* games • Adult guided "modes"	• Digital, play literacies • Remixing • Adult gatekeepers
13	• New media incorporation • Trial and error • Demonstration of Minecraft	• Digital, play literacies • Technology discourses/issues • Peer relationships, negotiations, collaboration
14-16	• Affinity shift to Minecraft • Minecraft play • Technology connection	• Play discourses • Digital literacies • Belonging

Figure 3. Ninja Masters' actions, literacies, and discourses, Play Group session 10
Real and Emoji Animals: Using Technology to Belong (Horrace, 2023)

that showcase the notable literacies and discourses.

After surviving a dragon battle, watching several episodes of *Ninjago*, and holding a building competition, the tenth play group session took an impromptu shift when Jackson's cat walked in front of him. Jackson placed his cat in his lap, however, not mentioning this action.

Jackson holding his cat prompted William to start talking about his cats. This discussion elicited the Masters to bring their pets to the play group session for a second time.

When seeing Jackson's cat, William stated, "I have a cat, too. Let me get my cat!" He ran off camera and came back with his cat. "This is Gilbert." Then William's mom is heard in the background playfully asking, "What are you doing with the cat?"

Oliver stated, "Here, let me go get my pet." And then proceeded to fiddle around at the computer, clearly not moving anywhere to retrieve a pet.

As Jackson snuggled his cat he announced, "Here's my pet, one of them, at least." Then looking down to talk to his cat, he inquired, "Stormy, are you tired?"

William shared in his cat's exhaustion, "I also kinda just woke up Gilbert from a nap."

Oliver then proudly professed, "There he is" as his digital *pet* dog popped up in the lower corner of the screen.

Oliver carefully tried to teeter his hand placement to make the dog appear to "sit" on his hand. "Tiny dog," he said with a large smile spread across his face, immensely proud he used his technology skills to include himself into the pet conversation with his peers.

Since Oliver did not have a pet, he used an emoji dog from the Zoom options to act as his "pet" as the Masters shared about their animals—first telling about their animal friends and then engaging them in "talk" with one another.

"Hi Tiny Dog, I'm Stormy," Jackson used a deep voice as he embodied his cat to engage in dialogue with the other pets. "Do you like being tiny?"

"Ruff, ruff! Yes, so I can fit in my owner's hands so nice," Oliver is heard replying in a higher pitched voice, as if he was his tiny dog responding, and the boys shared in a laugh.

William then joined in as he became Gilbert and stated in a low voice, "I have nine brothers and sisters." But he then switched back to himself (as indicated with his regular voice) and continued, "Yes, I have ten cats. Here, I'll tell you their names," as if he needed to prove this statement, due to the shocked expressions on his friends' faces. William went on, "They are Gilbert, Charlotte, Cricket, Socks, Pickles, Artimus, Wilbur, Anna, Maisy, and Felix. Yep, that's ten. There are only four who routinely go indoors, though."

The Masters continued to discuss their pets' favorite activities, silly antics, and other pet-related topics, to include Oliver who gave "life" to his emoji pet, Tiny Dog. Oliver then realized he could have other "pets" using the Zoom emoji options. He went through a couple of other animals and then discovered candy, furniture, and finally animal facial emojis in which he made himself an animal using animal ears, noses, mouths, and other embellishments.

He continued turning himself into animals as William and Jackson discussed their pets until he engaged the boys enough to where they wanted to try out the digital features as well.

During this online play group session, digital features enabled the Masters not only to feel a sense of belonging as they shared in similar interests but also developed a deep sense of connection for the children as they were able to build back-stories about their pets, laugh at their discussions as they embodied their pets, and opened up another immersive space as the children could also become digital animals. Typically, during in-person play groups, only toys and stories are embodied, not animals. Perhaps due to the lack of physically shared toys during online play groups, children clung to other similarities and made quick connections to form bonds and strengthen their relationship as playmates.

Conclusion of 2021 Play Group

In an online play group held at the height of the pandemic, digital experiences were not just available, they were encouraged, so fittingly—if unexpectedly—they moved toward technology experiences. These children developed new relationships that deepened as they shared and expanded their affinities, which slowly pivoted away from LEGO play and *Ninjago* toward online and digital games. As children interacted with one another during online play groups, they discussed a

wide range of topics, teaching one another about new toys and concepts, which allowed them to position themselves as an expert, feeling empowered as they taught their online peers. Children weaved in and out of different media franchises (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Ninjago*) into LEGO-building competitions and into digital realms of *Minecraft*, empowering the Masters to take ownership over their participatory literacies and engagements in multiple literacy discourses.

Fall 2022 Play Group

As the United States emerged from lockdowns and closures spurred by the pandemic, our lives were altered—our children's play adapted to fit an increasingly digitized environment connected to school, friends, and family through electronics. My first play group, the Ninja Masters, who were experts in all things *Ninjago* but amateurs in online spaces, was spurred by the country's restrictions, but a year and a half later it became important for me to reevaluate online imaginative play groups and the novel space they provided to children. Were they still a valid way for children to play imaginatively and to connect meaningfully with one another?

The fall 2022 play group was filled with various activities, topics, and themes. Looking across the play group sessions, it was apparent that no single topic or item recurred throughout the play group time span. Due to the children's varied interests and topics of play, this play group was named Affinity Players for coding purposes and ease of identification.

In the upcoming vignette, I breakdown one of the Affinity Players' play group sessions (see figure 4) to demonstrate the children's expertise of actions that showcase the notable literacies and discourses.

> And then the battle broke out! It started with Jackson using a *Ninjago* ninja, Lloyd, to imaginatively "freeze" the screen so no other attacks could be made, but Jane "melted away" the ice from Jackson's "freeze" with her frog's fire. Weapons were shooting random items back and forth as Jackson and Jane engaged in interactive battling with one another, being silently watched by Elsa. Traditionally, children tend not to just "sit and watch" others engaging in interactive play, yet the digital affordances allowed this shy child to do just that.
>
> Then Jackson's *Ninjago* build shot a yellow brick toward the screen

Session	*Actions*	*Literacies and/or Discourses Present*
1	• Show-and-tell share • Playing through the screen	• Toy, Media, and Digital Literacies • Media Discourses • Belonging
2	• Show-and-tell share • Digital discussions • Zoom features • Playing through the screen	• Toy, Media, and Digital Literacies • Digital Discourses
3	• Players plan activity • Transmedia incorporation	• Negotiation and collaboration • Remixing • Belonging
4	• Co-authoring media storylines • Sharing cultural literacies • New affinity discovered • Screen conventions explored • Players discuss and compromise	• Toy, Media, Digital, and Cultural Literacies • Play Discourses • Embodiment • Peer relationships, belonging, collaboration, and negotiations
5	• Real vs Fake artifacts • Talk to Alexa *through* the screen	• Toy and Digital Literacies • Play and Technology Discourses
6	• Sharing affinities • Toys vs Minecraft • Constant imaginative play	• Toy Literacies • Toy and Media Discourses • Remixing • Peer relationships, negotiations
7	• Players discuss approved activities • Desire for peace • Connection across literacies • Sharing of knowledges and expertise • Compromise of session ending	• Play vs Digital Literacies • Peer relationships, collaboration, negotiations • Embodiment

Figure 4. Affinity Players' actions, literacies, and discourses, Play Group session 2
Playing through the Screen: Reading and Responding to One Another's Actions (Horrace 2023)

as he said, "Electricity hits your frog, zzzz!"

Jane rapidly moved her frog back and forth as she made electrocuted sounds.

Items continuously shot back and forth through the screen, hitting the player's warriors.

"He chopped one of your heads off!" Jane exclaimed.

"Nope! You missed. You cut his leg off," Jackson responded as he removed one of his dragon's legs. And then he continued, "His tail

slices your frog's spears heads off," waving his dragon's tail back and forth "shing, ding, shing."

"Wait, where is this?" Jane mumbled to herself as she looked around and then lifted up a spear, "But he only sliced off one!"

"Buckbeak sprays his laser!" Elsa declared, motioning a "laser" to project from her LEGO build.

A conversation ensued about Buckbeak's powers and abilities but was interrupted as Steve proclaimed, "Hey, I just joined the battle," waving a small sword back and forth.

Ramblings of "laser eyes" was heard as all the players yelled and shot things at the screen, talking, screaming, and making sound effects at the same time. All the different weapons continued to be shot as the players engaged in a cross-screen battle, removing parts of their build when injured by another player. Sidekicks were then created since original warriors were no longer in fighting shape, and the battle continued with yellings and full narration of what was taking place, which was needed due to the players' physical distance from one another. And then the little purple bunny popped back onto the screen. "You shot my bunny's ear off!" Jane exclaimed as the group laughed.

The players' quick responses of noises, motions, and action to one another's strikes and hits proved the ultimate play experience was taking place—the children were playing through the screen, unhindered by any digital limitations or barriers, truly being mediators of technology in their own play during this new online play space.

The players continued battling through the screen for another twelve minutes until their warriors were either defeated or could not be defeated due to their magical powers or regeneration potion. And while the battle came to a stop, it did not end, as the players paused the battle until the next play group. "Pause, let's pause. We'll resume it next week," Jackson said as he concluded the battle.

However, Jane was worried about her frog, so she suggested, "What about next week we do battle of the sidekicks?"

The players all seemed to agree, although it was hard to decipher exactly due to everyone excitedly talking at once about what they would be bringing the following week as if they were assigning themselves homework in preparation for their next play group. While the discussion and planning for the following week became a typical

event for these players, it is not something traditionally discussed during in-person play groups. Perhaps with the digital component and the schedule of the play group, it catered to the planning of future activities.

Conclusion of Spring 2022 Play Group

When children meet in a different environment, one in which they are not physically present, they need various digital literacy skills. The players used Zoom backgrounds and emoji effects to enhance their play and create a sense of belonging, because "multimodal features of online-based environments, such as emojis and virtual reactions, can be used to strengthen emotional engagement in a virtual setting" (Vartiainen 2021, 181). The players also tested screen conventions as they became mediators of technology, pushing boundaries and playing through the screen. As children battled stuffed animals covered in LEGO-built armor, the animals did not just ram into the computer screen, but rather the children's imaginations propelled the stuffed animals actually to fight and injure one another—as we saw when a child slashed his sword around and another child responded by moving her hand to pull back her stuffed otter's arm so it was hidden behind its back, as if it had been truly sliced off.

And even through all the giggles, exploration, and fun, the players still had their share of disagreements as they navigated through an online world with very minimal adult guidance. Children used their negotiation skills when difficulties arose, took votes, made their case as they tried to persuade the group, and avoided running to their parents for assistance. Even when technology issues occurred, the children jumped in and displayed their expertise, walking one another through steps to solve problems as they became digital natives in this new realm. Although the children came to this online play group with specific knowledge in some areas, they left seven weeks later as transformed players able to coauthor stories, mediate technologies, create shared literacies, and collaborate as a group with one main focus—to play.

Leg Godt: "Playing Well" across Screens

The LEGO Group (2022) defined its name LEGO as "an abbreviation of the two Danish words 'leg godt' meaning 'play well.'" During online play groups, the name was a natural draw for children to incorporate their toys as they formed

deep bonds over shared affinities with each other. The Ninja Masters showed their builds and then moved to playing through the screen when new members joined the adventure, as demonstrated in the vignette with the intense dragon battle and with the Affinity Players. They began their adventure battling through the screen, then navigated digital landscapes, only to return to controlling Alexa through the screen. I believe both play groups surpassed playing well and entered a new phase of play in which they truly looked beyond the screen and dissolved screen barriers while allowing their digital literacies to propel their play to a new dimension, a novel space of imaginary free play, highlighting belonging and acceptance into an affinity nexus of practice—Ninjago, LEGO, penguins, or play.

Growth across Play Groups: Literacies Leveling-up

The Ninja Masters began as a show-and-tell style play group, who took their time getting comfortable navigating technological elements, meeting and engaging online, and learning to move from interacting passively to dissolving their screen barriers and interacting across their screens incorporating digital components. Back when the masters began their play group, people were still navigating virtual spaces because it occurred in the middle of the pandemic. As a result, this deliberate session-by-session experience became the children's digital learning ground. Then when the masters did play through the screen, they did not make this a typical play group activity but rather used the sessions to explore many different tech and digital features, such as Zoom emojis, choice in website browsing, watching media together, and playing video games online with one another. The masters truly used their play group time as their own, doing what they wanted, when they wanted it, as long as tech issues did not interrupt.

The Affinity Players, however, took no time getting comfortable navigating digital and technological components. Considering the play group occurred a year and a half after the masters' play group, when the country had already experienced extensive virtual appointments, schooling, and other meetings, the players brought their digital literacies and experiences to their sessions and simply added play, which made for very lively interactions. Just like the masters, the players used their play group time as their own but with a more expansive scope. From the very beginning, they did not see screen barriers and understood technology could heighten their play if they just used their creativity and imaginations. Throughout this second study, I analyzed different play practices

Action	Talk	Play Practices	What is Mediated?	Meaning
Angling cameras to show LEGO figures and builds, more important than their face.	"Ahhh…computer!" Jackson yelled when he realized his figure was out of view. "Here, let me show you my table. You'll see." William said as he set up his device to be able to display is current environment.	Animating *Ninjago* figures: movement, storying Toy greater than self	Digital literacies Screen conventions	Children's understanding of screen conventions Children's choice of sharing toys versus their face, level of importance
William knocked off his dragon's back leg and tail as LEGO Dragons banged into computer screens. Stuffed animals were injured during battle as children "split" them open.	William accused Jackson, "Your dragon got my dragon's leg and tail, but luckily, my dragon can regenerate limbs." "Shing!" Jackson said as he sliced his arm down the screen in response to Jane's action of opening her penguin's stomach.	Animating media character battling Playing video game conventions: regeneration Negotiations of toys and "rules" Building to destroy	Collaboration through the screen *Ninjago* cultural knowledges Extension of storylines Digital literacies Play discourses	Stories continue as rules shift and morph Children extend characteristics and personality Play crosses boundaries Screens do not hinder imaginative play
Children as experts of LEGO, technology, media, etc.	"The base looks like giant babe LEGOs," Jane answered. "You go into Google," Jane guided Elsa. One and a half-hours," as he was teaching his young, six-year-old friend the correct way to phrase time.	Play with rules Leaders, followers and teachers, students	Children's knowledges Participatory literacies Digital literacies	Children can take the "expert" role to teach their peers Children learn best when they participate in a collaborative group—mentoring, guiding, and learning

Figure 5. What's the Meaning of It All?

to determine specifically what was mediated and what it all meant in terms of literacies, discourses, and actions in children's play.

Figure 5 provides a few examples of excerpts from the study broken down to show the action, talk, play practices, mediation, and meaning of specific moments.

Implications for Future Practice

During the study, the Ninja Masters group remained comprised of boys of the same race within two years of age from each other, but the Affinity Players group contained mixed races and genders, spanning six to ten years old in age. Although gender was not specifically discussed, there were moments, especially in the Affinity Players group, in which gender inclusions and exclusions became prevalent. For example, during session 5, Jackson did not engage with the other female players, but rather he waited for Steve, another male participant, to join. Only then did he bring up battling.

Using gender as a catalyst, it would be interesting to analyze the toys the masters and players brought to their play groups, noting any patterns, biases, stereotypes, set rules, and so forth. I showed and described toys and media throughout this study but made no reference to gender norms and cultural appropriations as they relate to the children's gender. Understanding the dynamic the children have with their toys and media, along with understanding gender, I would like to evaluate gender further in the group dynamic and with the toys and media shared during their play, because—as I noted in Horrace (2021)—"similar to a favorite stuffed animal that comforts a child at bedtime, children have developed a deep connection to these characters and stories that becomes part of their daily lives" (79).

Gender aside, the Affinity Players enjoyed a more diverse age group, which possibly led to more imaginative play and various topics throughout the sessions. Consequently, I would like to investigate the effects of age, as well as age spans, on an online play group. Looking at my other two play groups, one had a large age range, similar to the Affinity Players, and one had a group of children all exactly the same age. It would be interesting to explore further how children's ages affect their imaginative play, toy choices, and interactions in an online environment.

Children typically attend their neighborhood school and, in turn, have

neighborhood friends. But online play groups expand a child's neighborhood. When looking at play group benefits, multiculturalism cannot be ignored. The Affinity Players included children of various races from various backgrounds and neighborhoods, all meeting together and bonding over similar experiences. Although I did not analyze the children's specific cultures, I consider multiculturalism an important element of online play groups because, as Chudacoff (2007) says, "the site of their play activity has always served as the most basic factor in children's abilities to assert their own culture" (4), which is foundational as I further explore the question: Do online imaginative play groups allow more diversity than traditional, neighborhood play groups?

The Possibilities of Online Imaginative Play Groups

As inequities in children's opportunities to develop digital literacies became exacerbated by the pandemic, online play groups explored the possibility to support immersive literacies and to enable play when children could not be together physically. In this manner, online environments can be a great equalizer for many different circumstances and families.

Being part of a retired military family, I understand the problem created by constant moves, and my heart often ached as my children had to make new friends year after year. However, with the technology opportunities for not just conversations or online games, but also for an actual space all their own, they can share in imagination and creativity. As Horrace and Wohlwend (2023) wrote, "think 'screen pals'—a real-time, play-centered digital upgrade on 'pen pals'"(55). Online play groups can help children in mobile families continue friendships after a move, hopefully making the transition easier and friendships stronger.

As a homeschooling mother, I reached out to this tight-knit community to find participants for my study because I understood the need of homeschoolers for socialization. When weather, busy schedules, and illness do not allow for in-person gatherings, having an alternative way to meet with peers who hold similar interests makes a world of difference to children who are not immersed in a schooling environment. As I saw in one of my play groups (not included in this study), all three participants were homeschooled, and they not only discussed this fact several times, they also understood when some children's schoolwork had not been completed and they needed to finish up as they just listened rather

than engaged in playful activities with the group.

Looking at situations that challenge children's emotional well-being, such as sicknesses or hospitalizations, using online play groups can offer chances for real play with peers. When children are unable to interact with their friends, leave the hospital, or engage in fun activities, online imaginative play groups can provide a safe space for children to connect with their friends and form deep connections and a space for belonging while also bringing back some of their playful innocence.

Although I studied online imaginative play groups with children in their home environments, I fully believe these sessions can extend into public spaces such as classrooms and libraries. A network of interconnected online play groups across libraries and classrooms would enable children to play with others outside their immediate community. This interaction would not only draw in local families but also spur engagement across other communities due to the extended outreach, contributing to diversity and multiculturalism as children engage with others beyond their neighborhood.

There are countless ways online imaginative play groups can be incorporated into children's lives and communities, all of which provide ample benefits for children as play empowers children to take ownership of what they like and find their identity when they play their way through favorite storylines. With online play groups, children combine technology and digital literacies to interact, playing through the screen with actions or the use of avatars taking the form of a favorite toy or superhero (Wernholm 2021). Whether in person or online, play is relevant in the lives of children and should be celebrated and encouraged regardless of the platform.

Concluding Thoughts

Children develop key skills and abilities through participation in online imaginative play groups. They can implement their abilities using new technologies such as digital literacy skills and innovator dispositions; the exploration of screen conventions; and their abilities to negotiate, lead, and teach during collaborative storying and the regulation of socioemotional responses through peer engagement (Horrace and Wohlwend 2023). Online imaginative play groups are not only child centered, but child led. The experience seems truly tailored to the groups' interests and wants, rather than the preconceived notions of adults. And

through this experience, imaginative play had no parameters, no barriers standing in the way of what children's imaginations can create and think up. Together, children bonded and shared, bridging their communities and creating a new local context for their online friends. As educational leaders and play advocates, I wrote in Horrace (2023), "Let us embrace the unique opportunities that online imaginative play groups offer and watch our children play their way *through* the screen as together they become creators, collaborators, and storytellers, remixing their way across literacies and discourses as they navigate their social and cultural belonging" (239).

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