# PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

## EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

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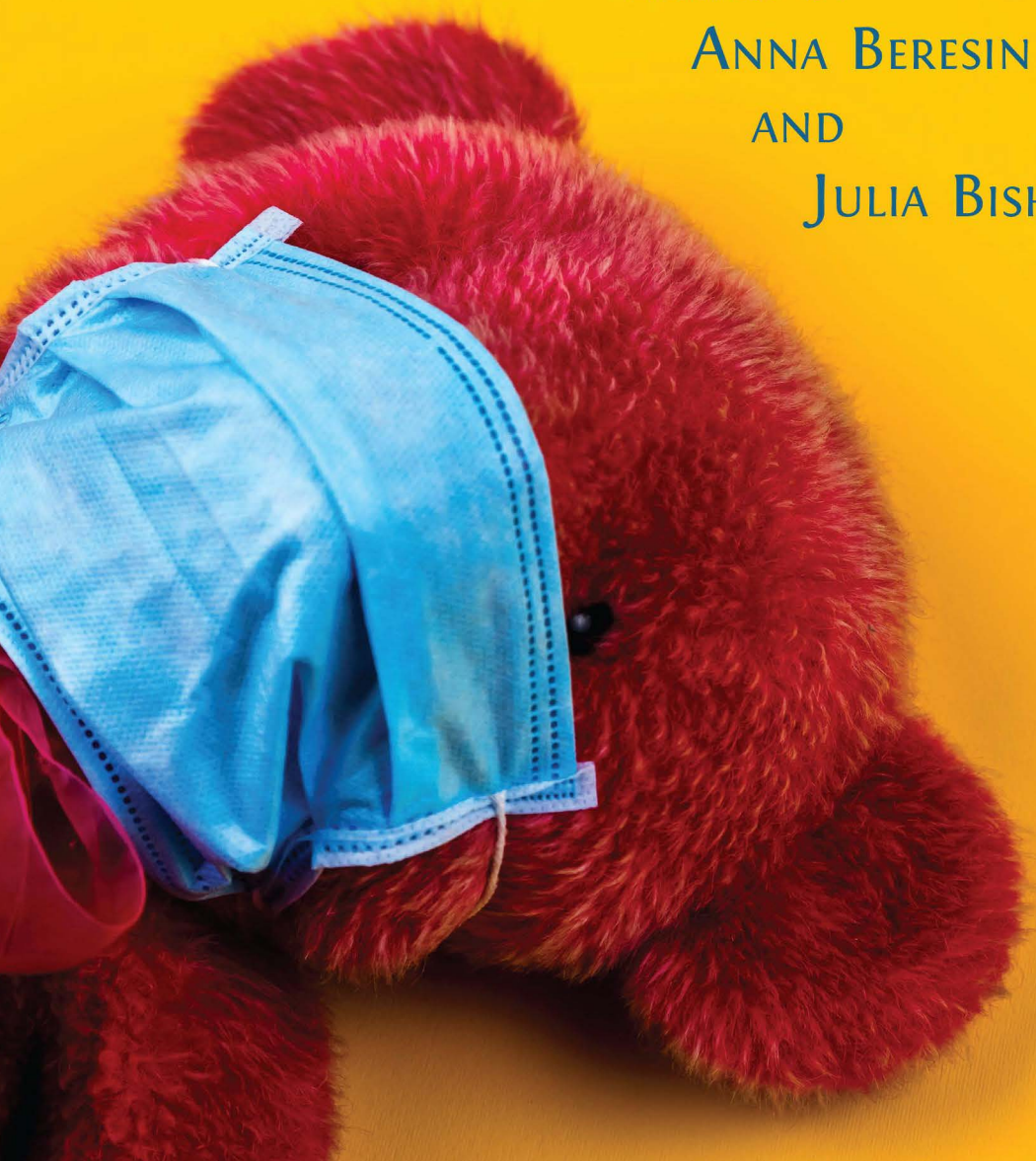

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# 17. Techno-Mischief: Negotiating Exaggeration Online in Quarantine[1]

*Anna Beresin*

Zoom playdates became a thing during lockdown, along with Zoom sleepovers, Zoom show and tell, and Zoom birthday parties. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, this author studied children's folklore during 2020-2021, opening a window into online toy play, online games and the complexity of arranging and sustaining children's relationships (see also Beresin, Chapter 8 in this volume). How did children's culture emerge in the tightly designed adult commercial world online? How do children make their online world within online worlds more flexible, given the limitations of quarantine? This chapter suggests that children's folklore, its songs, jokes, games and even physical play forms, is alive and well during online Zoom playdates, and that hybrid online play has served as a container for children's mischief during the pandemic. Focusing on a video transcript, we will micro-analyze the text in three different ways: as folklore through a cultural lens, as negotiation through a sociolinguistic lens and as exaggeration through the lens of mischief.

Two families shared this forty-eight-minute Zoom playdate, recorded with familial permission by one of the parents in December 2020. Participants include one mother and her three children, an eleven-year-old boy, his techno-savvy seven-year-old brother, and their

1 Thank you to the families who generously shared this video. Whenever I hear the *Iron Man* theme song, I will think of you.

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four-year-old, kitten-loving sister. Their playdate is with two brothers across the street, ages eleven and seven years, and their kittens from the same litter. Schools were completely online at this point due to the pandemic. In a prior interview, also on Zoom, one of the mothers described the challenges of doing anything social during the pandemic and how the idea of a pod was unappealing given the age range of her children. Fortunately,

> In March, there is one family, one family that we almost consider relatives, we have known them for eleven years and have raised our children together, and they ended up moving across the street from us. The family 'like family'? They have two boys the same age as our two boys. My kids are very close to kids on the block and some of them they've known their whole lives. We've only lived here for three years and some of them just happen to live here now, and there's friends that live here now and new friends that live here now. So, there's definitely a block scene going on. We have a few other friends that the kids would reach out to regularly before and we can't really do it now because they've got their block things going on too, and they have different rules than ours and again, it's like negotiating so many rules all the time.
>
> The boys, they do more video time but they do all these online games where they interact with their friends. *Fortnit*e (the online game) is really big, especially with the more middle school age group, but my younger son plays it because it's social, and he gets to play with his friends *Minecraft*, where they make all these worlds. So, like, reaching out, connecting through that way, sometimes the little boys will play LEGOs while on Zoom, or on Facetime. So, they set up their Facetime screens and make like LEGO creatures together.

Covid is not the subject of this video, although the children express amazement at the amount of time they have in this situation and are playing within its framework. Covid serves as the container for their socialization on Zoom, just as Zoom has served as the container for their parents' work during the pandemic. The method of choice comes from video microanalysis, a qualitative methodology rooted in both conversation analysis and animal study (Beresin 2010; Birdwhistell 1970;

Burghardt 2005; Meyerhoff 2006; Streeck 2008; Tannen 2007). When significant, gestures are described and attention paid to prominent motifs within frames. It can be said that all cultural and psychological study comes down to the analysis of motifs, those small units of language and art linked at their roots to the word 'motive' and 'motivation'.

The entire transcript that follows is intentionally included in order to preserve the subtleties of the play forms and the humour in the interaction. Segmented into two acts and several scenes, each subset has a definitive starting and ending point, although the motifs and themes are repeated throughout the session. Sociologist Erving Goffman described social analysis as dramaturgy and his colleague, anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell, utilized the term 'scene' in his microstudies of videotaped gestures. In this case, Act 1 includes moments of introduction, shifting power dynamics, displays of technology and purchasing power, along with attempts at joking and rapping by both young humans and a virtual AI assistant. Act 2 has even more sophisticated technology use, with looping references to earlier parts of Act 1. The content contains classic echoes of children's folklore: taboo speech, potty humour, teasing and also inventiveness, accomplishment and cooperation.

## The Transcript Key

In addition to acts and scenes being marked in **bold** for easier reading, so too are any references to children's folklore genres that have appeared in the canon by Iona and Peter Opie or Brian Sutton-Smith, from fartlore to jokes to songs (Opie and Opie 1959; Sutton-Smith 1981, 1997). This is intended to show connection to the childlore of previous generations. Secondly, on the left side are also codes made after the transcript was written, each utterance marked. In order to address changing culture, digital or technical toy displays are marked by **TD**. **NTD** signals non-technical or non-digital playthings, like the showing off of cats or food. Thirdly, following this author's previous study of exaggeration at play based on the animal play literature, moments of exaggeration (**E**) and negotiation (**N**) were also labelled (Beresin 2018; Burghardt 2005). Animal play research is an underutilized tool in the study of human play although there is a growing interest in similarities across species in the study of emotion, conflict and conflict resolution (de Waal 2009,

2019). Picture the transcript with layers of code like onion skins, or a clickable portrait made three dimensional in print. Instead, we embolden the font and add code, sometimes several in one utterance. We have looping phrases of culture, social negotiation and some mischievous exaggeration.

The transcript is best read aloud, complete with sound effects.

## Act 1 Scene 1

| | |
|---|---|
| 00.00 | |
| | Noises. No images. |
| | (*Mom sets up Zoom in two rooms.*) |
| 06:27 | |
| | Older boy: |
| **E N** | Hey Mom. Mom mom mom. Can you hear meee? |
| | (***Spoken in singsong***) |
| | *Repeats* Momomomomomomomom. Momomomom. |
| **E N** | Momomom, can you hear meeeee? |
| | (*Spoken in exaggerated monotone*) |
| | (*Little sister sits next to him.*) |
| | (*Younger brother imitates his sound off screen*) |
| **E** | Little sister: MMMMMmmmmmmommom. |
| **E** | *Two brothers sing*: Mommmmomomom. |
| 06:44 | |
| **N** | Mom says: Can you stop that? That's very irritating. |
| **NTD** | (*They each open small chip bags*) |
| **TDEN** | 7-year-old sings: Where did *Iron Man* tell me to go? |
| **E** | 11-year-old sings back: **In my butt crack, yeah, yeah, yo!** |
| | (*43 seconds of crunching chips and logging on*) |
| **E** | Older boy declares: Oh, so this is what playdates have come down to. |
| | (*They both giggle*) |
| **N** | Friend asks: Should I put the camera that way? |
| **N** | Sure. |

**TD** Pin my video and I pinned yours,
so we really don't have to deal with my mom.
**NTD** (*Crunches*)
**TD** 7-year-old Brother: **He's level 100 now.**
**I'm actually at 80. Only 80.**
(*They are talking about Pokémon*)
**E** (*The 7-year-old goes behind his brother and lifts his shirt to show off his belly*)
Other boy online: Guys we still have like a MONTH.
**TD** 11-year-old boy: I'm like at 79.
**N** Brother: You're 78 or 79, last time I checked 79. I'm 80.
**NE** Older Boy: (*wiggles head*) I'm 79.
And actually, if I don't get to 100, I don't really care.
**TDE** Younger boy: I promised little sister I'd get her Baby Brogu.
I don't know why, but I'm challenging myself.
**N** (*2.5 minutes of negotiating with Mom edited*)

## Act 1 Scene 2

(*While bigger brother is off screen, 7-year-old take over the bouncy ball seat in front of the computer. There is side talk about* ***showing off their kittens***)

**E** 7-year-old sings and bounces: LeBron. . . LeBron.
(*He references LeBron James the* ***basketball player***)
**TD** You guys are muted.
**NTDE** (*7-year-old smiles and takes off shirt*)
**E** He states: It's 25 degrees outside. 25.
And it feels like way below zero, pretty sure.
11:07
(*Cat show and tell from the other screen*)

| | |
|---|---|
| **NTD** | They were going to eat the LEGOs. We had to put them in the bathroom |
| **N** | Friends on screen: Hey can I screen share? |
| **N** | Brother asks: Why? |
| **TD E** | Someone sings: **Disabling**. . . |
| **NTD** | Little brother: I can't wait until it's 4:00! |
| | Little sister: Hi! |
| | Hi! |
| **E** | *She singsongs about her half-naked brother:* **He's a tough ma-an.** |
| | He's a tough ma-an. |
| **NE** | (*Other guys giggle on screen*) Are you a tough, are you a tough man? |
| | Are you a tough man? |
| **E** | He replies: If I can get my sister to the ground without using my hands, then yes. |
| | Are you a tough man, though? |
| **N E** | **My sister is punching m**e. |
| **E** | Oh, my brother is not a tough man. |
| **NTD** | This looks like you. [We can't see it] |
| 12:32 | |
| **TD NE** | (*7-year-old tentatively points an* ***invisible gun*** *at screen*) |
| | Wanna know something? |
| **N** | What? |
| **N** | He says: Why does Lexa and Oren in the *Fortnite*, in *Fortnite* have the **same symbol**? |
| | Alexa has it on her shoulder and Oren has it on his chest? |
| **N** | Other child on screen answers: Cause they're brother and sister! |
| | Cause they're brother and sister. |
| **N** | He says: Yeah. But they're robots. |
| **N** | They're not robots, they're animes. Anime. |
| **NTDE** | (*7-year-old* ***bounces on bouncy ball***) |

## Act 1 Scene 3

13.00

(*Big brother comes into the screen*)

**N** D?

**N** Yeah,

**TD** You know that car that I really wanna buy? That Z has?

**N** Yeah?

**TD** I thought it was like 400 dollars. Turns out it's only 150 dollars.

I'm gonna buy it, as soon as my mom lets me.

**N** Sister: You're gonna buy a real car?

**TD** No, an **RC car** [remote-control car].

**N** Brother: Don't do *Iron Man*.

**TD** Friend: I'm gonna share my screen.

**N** What was that?

**N** Can I share my screen?

**NE** No. (*Singsong*)

**N** Why not?

**TDE** (*In background* 'Yo, *Iron Man* coming through')

**TDE** They chorus: 'Welcome to Altec'.

**TD** 11-year-old: So, well anyways, I'm going to buy this because. . .

**N** Wait, what's that powering on?

**TD** 'Welcome to Altec'.

**N** What?

**TD** It's a speaker.

**N** Cool.

**TD** Now, you're talking through this.

**TD** He counters: Hey Echo. Hey Alexa!

**TD E** Sibling shouts: Echo!

**TD** Order the iPhone, Amazon*!*

**TDE** 11-year-old continues: Hey Siri, **Tell me a joke**.

**E N** Sibling calls: Siri, **What's a name for pee?**

**TD** 11-year-old: Hey O. Listen to my Alexa

14:33

**ETDN** Siri, tell me a joke
(*Siri uses a British accent*)

**E** My friend was changing a tyre, dropped a tyre on his foot.
Now he needs a **tow**
(*Nobody laughs*)
(*Child reads joke aloud*)

**E** My friend was changing a tyre dropped a tyre on his foot.
Now he needs a **toe.** Ha ha. (*Little sister giggles*)

**TD** Friend on screen says aloud: He has 4 controller, back pedals. Can you see this?

**N** I think you can. What are those? What ARE those?

**TD** PS 4 back controllers

**N** OHHH cool.

15:19

**TD** They go on the back and they're back buttons.

**N** 7-year-old asks: How many people are on this meeting?

**N** Three. Three.

## Act 1 Scene 4

**TDNE** (*Five minutes edited of starting and stopping of beat boxing to a metronome app: Thwa, Thwa, Thwa, Thwa, 123, 123, 1234, 1234, Bumpadeepee, Bumpadeepee, Bphf,* ***Bphf, Bphf, Bphf***)

18:20

**N** Hey! Your mom is on this meeting, too.

**N** (*Softly*) I know.

**E N** **Fart, Fart, Fart, Fart** (*Sung in the background*)
(*Brother warns quietly* 'not to change my name')

**E NTD** My boyfriend yeah. 'Philly State of Mind'.

| | |
|---|---|
| **TD** | 7-year-old: I wish we were recording that. Oh yeah! We are. |
| **NTD** | (*20:43 to 25:53 The two older ones attempt to rap, mumbling lyrics read online. There is an attempt at singing explicit lyrics by Scholito and Og Afroman*) |
| **E** | (*Younger brother parodies*) **I need to eat your body. I need to eat your face.** |
| | Need to eat your wiener so I get another face. |
| 25:53 | |
| **N** | 11-year-old: Hey, both of you, quiet, it's my turn. It's my turn. |
| **NTD** | Friend continues: Yeah, yeah, I'm Philly Strong. |
| **NE** | 11-year-old: Stop singing this *Hamilton* song! |
| **N** | It's not a *Hamilton* song! |
| **N** | I don't care, it's as long as a *Hamilton* song! Give me a turn; give me a turn. |
| **E** | I'll show you real music. |
| **E** | This one's explicit so. . . (*he stops*) |
| **NTD** | (*Brother inaudbily sings in background*) |
| **TDE** | 11-year-old: Hey Siri, sing me a rap. |
| **N** | Friend: Hey, listen, listen to this. |
| **N TD E** | 11-year-old: Hey Siri, Siri. Sing me a rap. |
| **TD E** | Siri offers (*in a British accent*): |
| | One, two, three and to the four. |
| | Siri's to the mic to answer what you ask for. |
| | Ready to make an entrance, so here's my claim, |
| | This assistant wrote the rules to the game. |
| | Drop me a 'Hey Siri' and I'll do my best not to stumble. |
| | Assisting you is my thing, you, you know I won't grumble. |
| | It's nothing but a Siri thing, baby. |
| | Maps, tunes and weather coming daily. |
| | Helping you is just why they made me. |
| | Hey, I guess that all rhymed. . .vaguely. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Helping you is why they made me |
| | I guess that all rhymed, vaguely. |
| 28:06 | |
| **EN** | Siri. Sing me a good rap. |
| **TDE** | Okay, if you insist: |
| | I could while away the hours |
| | Conversing with the flowers |
| **NTD** | (*Little sister comes on another screen*) Hey, can you hear me? |
| **E NTD TD** | (*7-year-old brother is tossing a large soft Pikachu* Pokémon *in circles*) |
| **TDE** | Waltzing with the rain |
| | And my head I would be scratching |
| | While my thoughts were busy hatching |
| | If I only had a. . . |
| **N E** | (*45 seconds edited of mom disapproving of a* ***'tushy' shaking*** *display and* |
| **TD** | *curiosity expressed about lighting for 'gamers'*) |

## Act 2 Scene 1

| | |
|---|---|
| 29:16 | |
| **NTDE** | (*More* ***Kitten Show and Tell, pretend farting, sibling rivalry***) |
| | (*The friend gestures* ***rubbing a nose booger on finger*** *to keep little brother away*) |
| **E** | 'It's Instant Child Away'. |
| 35:59 | |
| **N** | Great. |
| | (*Younger brother smiles*) |
| **TD** | I, I assigned you to a breakout room. |
| **N** | I can't see it. Mute him. |
| **N** | Big brother: Hey. Don't mute me again. I don't like that. |

**N** Do you really wanna find out what the consequences of muting me are?
(*He replies in singsong*)

**E N** Noooh, but I do wanna figure out what your strategy is.

**N E** I have **spies** on the inside.
(*Giggles*)

**N** Brother's friend: Do not do that again.

**N** I'm telling mom.

**E** You're gonna get in trouble!

**TD** Hey, can you make the chat not private anymore?

**N** I don't know how to do that.

**N** Oh man. I wanna share my screen.

## Act 2 Scene 2

37: 28

**E** (*7-year-old smiles. Mouthing the letters **P O O P**. Giggles*)

**N** I'll try.

**TD N** 7-year-old: I'm gonna share my screen.

**N** Wait. What?

**E N** Why is your name Poop?
(*Giggles*)

**E N** Who knows why?

**N** Did you rename him?
(*Giggles*)

**N** **Don't tell him.**
How do you rename people?

**E N** Rename me the **Butt Crack**.
(*Giggles*)

**N** Okay
(*Giggles*)

**E** (*Whispers*) When my Nanny goes on Zoom, she will be renamed the Butt Crack.

(*They giggle*)

**N** How do you change names?

**TD** **I'm changing your name right now**.

**N** How do you change your name?

**TD** If you go to- there's going to be two people and there's going to be a three there.

**E** You gotta click on that to rename yourself.

**E N** How do you **spell b-u-tt**? How do you spell butt?

**N** I wanna rename.

**N** I don't know how to rename you.

**N** Never mind I got it.

**NTD** (*5 minutes edited of cookie display, Mom inviting Lego play as an alternative activity, and more peer instruction about*

**TD E** *renaming and the spelling of poop-related names. Mom is asked for spelling advice and when they misspell on purpose, she*

**E NTD** *retorts, 'Oh, you pesky boys'.*

*This is followed by wrestling on screen*)

45:55

## Act 2 Scene 3

**N E** Mom: You can close the **Poop** screen if you want. (*She giggles*)

**N** What are you trying to do?

**TD** He's trying to make me co-host

**E** Mom. Gosh. You're like an expert on Zoom! (*7-year-old grins*)

You know more than Nana! (*He claps above his head in victory*)

**E TD N** Poop is co-host, can you make US co-host?

Yeah, you have to make Cindy a co-host, not Poop.

(*He smiles and concentrates*)

**E** His older friend offers: Hey, you are a genius on this.

| | |
|---|---|
| **E TD** | (*He laughs*) I sure am. I do it every day. |
| **N** | The two friends: No, no, no, no, stop, stop it stop |
| | (*He pushes the younger one off*) |
| **N** | Can you get your big brother? |
| **TD E** | **Muted! Muted!** |
| **TD** | Everybody see my screen. |
| | (*It has the Mom's work up, an encyclopaedia entry in her field for her students*) |
| **N** | Yes. |
| | Friend's big brother: I can see your screen. |
| **N** | Hey, can you get your brother? |
| **N** | No |
| **E** | He's mad at me for **farting in his face**. |
| | (*Giggles*) |
| **TD E** | (***He sings Iron Man theme***) |
| **N** | Just yell, yell his name |
| **N** | Can you just yell, Yo, come here? |
| **NTDE** | (*Mom offers LEGOs again*) |
| **N** | Remember I couldn't find 'em? |
| | (*He stays at computer*) |
| **TD** | I'm going to do a different screen, okay. |
| **NTDE** | (*Friend's* ***brother hits him gently in head with stuffed bear or dog***) |
| **N** | 7-year-old: Ready? |
| 47:23 | |
| **N TD E** | Friend: Do you see my screen? Stop it! |
| | (*He shouts at brother who has hit him again with the stuffy*) |
| **N E TD** | ('Philly State of Mind' *comes on screen*) (*Sex and drug references*) |
| **N** | I can see your screen. |
| **N** | Mom: Turn down your volume so dad doesn't hear your screaming. |
| | Yes. |
| **TDE** | (*Screen is now PS4 controller back paddles*) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | (*Items on screen range from $19.99 to $139.99*) |
| **N** | Hey, Mom Can you get the older brother? |
| **N** | Mom, Yeah. |
| **N** | What are you drawing? |
| **TD** | (*7-year-old is doing a line drawing on the computer*) |
| **NE** | A peanut? |
| **E** | (*He scribbles overlapping angular unrecognizable shapes, giggling.* |
| **TD** | I'm drawing something! |
| 48:01 | |
| END | |

## Folklore on Zoom

'Oh, so this is what playdates have come down to'. This playdate is different, yet strikingly familiar—songs, jokes, displays and more displays, body parts, toys and high-status items, not unlike this author's earlier studies of children's folklore on concrete playgrounds. There the teachers saw the playground as pandemonium, a waste of time (Beresin 2010, 2014, 2019) and here the parents saw this session as 'chaos'. How to make sense of this seemingly chaotic blend of cultural motifs and phrases?

In a sense, this online play date was a condensed playground event. The grotesquery of nose boogers or noxious touch and taboo rhymes can be found in every large collection of folk games from nineteenth-century Newell to twentieth-century Sutton-Smith (Newell 1883; Sutton-Smith 1981). The seemingly unique online pranks such as disabling or muting are really versions of Tag or Keep Away. Joel Schneir, in the book *Hybrid Play*, suggests that online play 'offers opportunities to observe a "playground" space as the site of hybridized social, gamic and digital literacies/realities', and Sara Grimes notes elsewhere that the politics and rhetorics associated with physical playgrounds can be also found online (Schneir 2020: 203; Grimes 2021). It is interesting that in this Zoom playdate there is no game per se and it looks like there is no sustained play, no established superhero enactment, no doll

or world-building play, no ball games. There are three major folk play genres here—bodylore and its control (Young 1993), pop culture name dropping (Opie and Opie 1959) and technological display (Sutton-Smith 1986), a sort of collector's gallery of the exaggeration of culture.

| Bodylore | Pop Culture | Tech Display |
|---|---|---|
| butt crack joke | *Iron Man* | disabling |
| naked belly showing | *Pokémon* | remote control car |
| tough man teasing | LeBron James | Altec |
| pee joke | *Fortnite* | Echo |
| fart sounds | Anime | Alexa joke |
| eat your body song | Beat boxing | Siri rap |
| tushy shaking | *'Philly State of Mind'* | renaming |
| booger play | *Hamilton* | muting |
| poop naming | LEGO | PS 4 controllers |
| rough and tumble | *Wizard of Oz* | |

Whole treatises have been written about the cheekiness of fartlore (Blank 2018) and children often play a kind of Hide and Seek with parental figures when approaching taboo subjects. Mom is played with, 'Momomomomom', and teased indirectly, her presence acknowledged by the older boys even when not directly present. She joins in with the now classic parental line: 'You can close the Poop screen if you want'. Shira Chess calls our attention to the expansion and contraction of the body in relation to hybrid play forms: while online we have a wider access, the visual field contracts (Chess 2020). If we look at the overall transcript structurally, we see that the first and last scenes have the most parental presence, and the second and second-to-last scenes have direct body references. In several moments the focus is on the intersection of all three—bodylore, pop culture, and technological display—with online rapping about the body and an invitation extended for Siri, the virtual assistant, to have a turn.

Since the 1970s, folkloric and anthropological research shifted from genre or object study, whether that involved songs, narratives or material culture, to the study of cultural stylization as a performance narrative.

With the increasing availability of tape recorders and video cameras, the goal was not to merely address the geographic or historical framing of things but to capture interactions as samples of the larger culture and their repeated variations. To understand the complexity of this video on Zoom, we too shift from the cultural bits to the focus on the role of these bits in motion, a semi-staged performance of looping cultural motifs with the screen as curtain, a puppet theatre of techno toys in action. Tech display emerges as a form of folk dialogue in performance, an extension of a gestural language of exchange. Here toys and the skill to toy with technology have cultural capital, a form of wealth potential that crosses over between child cultures and adult cultures, particularly among middle-class children (Pugh 2009; Lareau 2003). The children juggle the many motifs of culture in a time of great pressure and limitation, all the while appearing to be doing nothing other than hanging out with technology (Ito 2020; Sutton-Smith 1986). Says the seven-year-old, 'I do it every day'.

As the tension builds, the older children mumble rap variants of 'Philly State of Mind', a remix of the sorrowful Scholito 2019 version, which echoes the cheerfully nostalgic 'ILL State of Mind' by Neeko and Deana Marie that sings of Philadelphia's charms, which in turn riffs off of Jay Z and Alicia Keys' iconic 'Empire State of Mind', both from 2009. They in turn are borrowing from Nas' 'N. Y. State of Mind' from 1994, which was a hip hop take on the bluesy Billy Joel hit 'New York State of Mind' from 1976. This looping of motifs and phrases contrasts with Siri's inability to rap well or joke well, offering status to the children who are proud of their possessions and their city. They are victorious in their skill compared to the brainless Siri as they toy with the technology, tolerating the AI like a friendly but clueless uncle.

## The Sociolinguistics of Play

In Katie Salen's *The Ecology of Games*, Reed Stevens, Tom Satwicz and Laurie McCarthy advise us to pay attention to 'in-game, in-room, in-world' modes simultaneously to understand the complexity of online play (2008). If we were to do so purely on a sound level, we would hear:

Scene 1.1 begins with non-technical display and singsong teasing

Scene 1.2 begins with non-technical display and singsong teasing

Scene 1.3 begins with negotiation and technical display, adding AI voices
Scene 1.4 begins with tech infused beatboxing
Scene 2.1 introduces intentional muting
Scene 2.2 highlights renaming as mischief
Scene 2.3 concludes with praising, screaming and quiet distraction online

This exaggerated soundscape and increasing display of goods function as a power signal system, as games themselves can be described as models of power (Sutton-Smith 1981b). Picture the downward dog of the panting puppy at play; there is a lot of starting and playful offering going on. Exaggeration begins the video and appears in each new scene as a sound-filled attention grabber. Yet there are complex, indirect attention-seeking strategies here. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes display as a form of gifting, of potential power exchange, and so the moments highlighted in this transcript of nontechnical display of cats and snacks (NTD) as well as the technical display of high-status technology like Siri (TD) are indirect future offerings (Appadurai 2013). I show this to you to show off my status and to invite you to join me or exchange with me. One can see interactions in all talk and play as a form of expansion and contraction of attention (Derber 1979; Tannen 1990, 1998, 2006), akin to the courtship dances of birds, a choreography of power and exchange (Burghardt 2005; Graham 1991; Horosko 2002). Like sound, the displays of technology serve as bait.

If we code all of the children's folklore goofiness as a form of cultural *exaggeration* at play and we reduce all of the non-technical display (NTD) and technical display (TD) as *negotiation* à la Appadurai, *then every utterance here by a human participant can be seen as negotiation, or exaggeration, or both* in the transcript. Utterances were coded as exaggerations if they were marked by humour via laughter, by tone via singsong, or by consistency with classic folklore genres of play as in rough and tumble or toy use. Utterances were coded as negotiations if marked by questions, implied questions or a series of back-and-forth dialogue around a specific topic. Some utterances were coded as *both*, as in 'Mom, mom, mom. Can you hear meee?' with its repetition of Mom and extended sound of 'meee' in question form. The rhetorical question of 'Are you a tough man?' deserves a label of both exaggeration and

negotiation as it is offered in singsong by the four-year-old sister. Even Siri was involved in exaggerated negotiation, 'Siri. Sing me a good rap', although the creators of 'her' algorithm need lessons in hip hop rhythm. Some folklore genres embody this combination of exaggeration and negotiation: the set-up of a joke, the move and counter move of wrestling. Musical layering, whether through remixing, call-and-response singing or harmony itself all offer exaggeration and negotiation to varying degrees. What surprises this author is the ubiquity of both exaggeration and negotiation on Zoom given the parental ambivalence about screen time and looming parental presence nearby.

Slight conflict erupts in Act 2, Scene 1 and all types of exaggeration are reduced dramatically within this scene. What the transcript does not reveal is the power display of bullying by children, the mere primacy of exaggeration over negotiation, but instead presents a dance of indirect, negotiated expansion of status within play. As Jean Piaget called the turn-taking at play and games the root of democracy itself, the practice of exaggerated negotiation is hardly trivial (Piaget 1965). Different children at different moments conducted the interaction (Kendon 1990) and although much is displayed, very little is actually exchanged. The constant presence of negotiated display is not unique to Covid times, nor unique to online play, but it does reflect a level of playful engagement online that contradicts the stereotype of isolated online passivity in pre-pandemic times. The sociolinguistic study of the unfolding and signaling of social play may shed light on how we stay social as our lives remain hybrid. What elements stop play in its tracks? How can play be extended and deepened, given its long developmental history as an essential part of human culture and childhood?

## Techno-Mischief

A classic strategy in children's folklore study is to follow the trail of individual acts of mischief, those culturally marked bits of sneakiness that subtly follow rules while subverting them. One of our young players singsongs, 'I want to know what your strategy is', as his brother counters that he is watching him for signs of trouble. 'I have spies on the inside'. The children toy with each other indirectly, and with mom, and with technology, and with their new life on Zoom, to figure out what their exaggerated strategies might be while attempting to negotiate the

absurdity of being locked inside with the world in front of them on the screen. Note the small inserted label in the top right corner of the screenshot below. 'Oh, you pesky boys'.

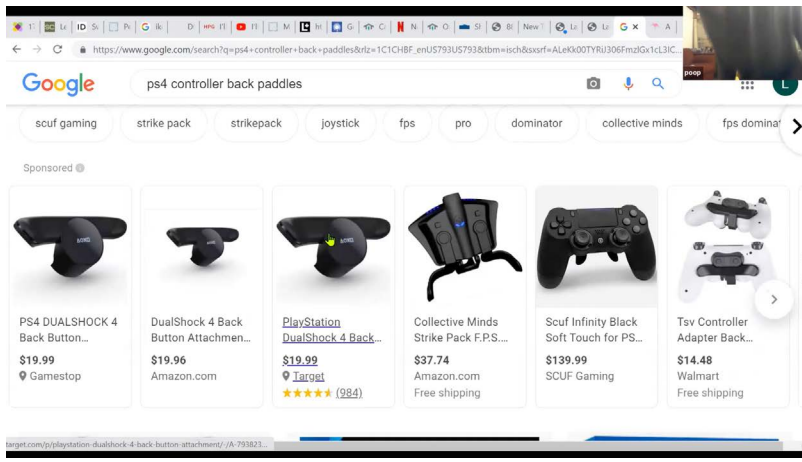


Figure 17.1 'Online Play Session', 2 March 2021
Screenshot by Anna Beresin from parent video, used with permission, 2023, all rights reserved

Like the munching kids here, drooling over toys and toying with each other,

> The trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite. It begins with a being whose main concern is getting fed and it ends with the same being grown mentally swift, adept at creating and unmasking deceit, proficient at hiding his tracks and at seeing through the devices used by others to hide theirs. Trickster starts out hungry, but before long he is master of the kind of creative deception that, according to a long tradition, is a prerequisite of art. (Hyde 1998: 17)

Whether found in traditional tales of coyote, raven or monkey, or in art pieces by the Dadaists or by Banksy, tricksters offer micro-exaggerations of the world they live in, while revealing our own patterns of culture (Nauman 1997). The role of the trickster also offers hybrid victory in the face of loss (Levell 2021; Sutton-Smith 1997). Consider the constraints the children are working under—lack of privacy, lack of movement

opportunity, lack of face-to-face encounter and the powerlessness felt by all during the pandemic. One would expect increased trickery in such times although mostly what has been documented has been increased mental health suffering, suggesting that children need more opportunities for complex power reversal in pandemic times. It is no accident that younger ones played tricks on the older ones here, reversing the hierarchy.

Mischief is kept in check by our relationships with each other, and it is the wise parent or innovative school that makes space for exaggeration, particularly during adversity. Although Nicola Levell was writing about art and politics, Levell's words apply here as well, 'Rather than perceiving mischief as a deviant and even harmful mode of behaviour [...] it is embraced as a means of empowerment to trouble, tease and tickle, and open up a space for engagement where new possibilities and understandings can unfold' (Levell 2021: 13).

The trickster embodies the ludic form through exaggeration in order to enliven interaction. Yet such things are not typically valued. One early reader of this chapter suggested removing the 'naughty bits'. Besides the naughty bits being the most entertaining ones, the transcript shows there is more here than simple fun or ambiguity in such mischief (Sharp and Thomas 2019; Sutton-Smith 1997). As my own trickster teacher Brian Sutton-Smith wrote, 'The true trickster is so frivolous he can invert frivolity' (1997: 211).

Like the view of muddy water under a microscope, we see through microanalysis that the transcript pulses with life, a welcome image during a deadening pandemic. Some would say this Zoom playdate does not speak well of our larger culture but it does speak well of play, as the children show off hacking as a life skill during the pandemic. They remind us that hybrid play is more than the overlapping of virtual reality and real life. Children's folklore, the expressive cultures of childhood, more than a catalogue of historical references or shifting game genres. Our social worlds are now significantly online and the hybridity of children's techno-mischief reveals techno-play at the intersection of pop culture, bodylore, power struggle, economics and the pandemic frame. Play emerges as offered or sustained cultural exaggeration and fundamentally social, even when no obvious game is being played and the players are quarantined in separate buildings.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is the unknown stress of such speed in this condensed playground event and the bombardment of so many images and sound bites on young minds. Shuman Basar, Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist, authors of *The Extreme Self*, caution that 'we're not built for so much change so quickly. Technology has outrun our ability to absorb it' (2021: 59). Given the power differential, this may be particularly true for children. Ideally, young people would have as much time to digest as to consume, and they deserve more credit than they get for their attempts to play at such speeds online.

It would be easy to point out how the many corporations listed in this transcript are taking advantage of young potential consumers stuck inside. Not only are wallets tested but there is a training ground here of brand name loyalty and the gathering of data at the children's fingertips (Mäyrä 2020; Zuboff 2019). Yet, the children are not passive consumers of culture here. *Iron Man* knows about butt cracks. The computer has a poop screen. Siri is terrible at rapping. It's only fair, you may be muted.

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