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Liberated through teddy bears: resistance, resourcefulness, and resilience in toy play during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Finnish citizens started to display teddy bears in their windows. As this activity gained media interest and popularity, it grew into a transgenerational form of toy play, where children and adults participated as displayers and spectators in this visual-material play pattern, made available to a broader audience through sharing on social media. A previous phase of the study articulated and analyzed the phenomenon as an act that facilitates mental well-being through imagination, participation, and playing for the common good (Heljakka, 2020). By theorizing and framing the phenomenon as pandemic toy play, the researcher suggested the importance of resistance, resourcefulness, and playful resilience in times of forced self-isolation and social distancing. This article builds on the earlier phase of the study by focusing on the previously identified themes and investigates the occurrence of these themes in adult toy play during a pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Adult toy play; intergenerational play; object play; pandemic play; playful resilience; toy activism

Introduction

The theme of survival is closely entwined with the beginnings of the teddy bear. As well-known in toy history, President Theodore Roosevelt saved a bear on a hunting trip. The story was covered by the international press and inspired toy companies in the U.S. and Germany to start their simultaneous production of 'Teddy's Bears.' 'It all began when Roosevelt was on a bear hunting trip near Onward, Mississippi on November 14, 1902' (Story of teddy bear). Political cartoonist Clifford Berryman immortalized the incident in a cartoon 'Drawing the Line in Mississippi' (The Strong, Teddy Bear). Berryman had read the article and decided to lightheartedly satirize the president's refusal to shoot the bear. Berryman's cartoon appeared in the Washington Post on November 16, 1902. Morris Michtom, a Brooklyn candy shop owner, saw the cartoon and had an idea. He and his wife Rose already made stuffed animals, and Michtom decided to create a stuffed toy bear and dedicate it to the president. He called it 'Teddy's Bear.' After receiving Roosevelt's permission to use his name, Michtom mass-produced the toy bears, which were so

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popular that he soon founded the Ideal Toy Company. To this day, the teddy bear has worldwide popularity, and its origin can be traced back to Theodore's fateful hunting trip (The Strong, Teddy Bear).

The teddy bear has inspired storytellers throughout the modern age: books (for example, Winnie the Pooh, Paddington), songs, and even a 1907 feature film marked the rising popularity of teddy bears. In 1998, it was elected to the Strong National Museum of Play's National Toy Hall of Fame (Teddy Bear. National Toy Hall of Fame). This fascination has persisted ever since the birth of the initially 'toyified' and later, 'cutified' bear—a character denoting helplessness and vulnerability that evolved from a 'long-limbed bear to a cute, snub-nosed, baby-like creature' (Morris, Reddy, & Bunting, 1995, p. 1697; Ngai, 2005). The figure of the bear has attracted makers of antique-style teddies as well as creators of designer toys, still active in the twenty-first century. Today, the teddy bear stands as the world's best recognized character toy (Leclerc, 2008) and as a toy that exists in various materials, forms, colors, and shapes, whether licensed or generic. There are even handmade versions in many homes across Europe and North America.

Toys are generally physical, fictional, functional, and affective artifacts. The physicality of toys means that, as objects, they provide tangible and multisensory experiences. Their fictional dimension points to the storytelling embedded in their visual and material design or backstory. The functionality of toys refers not only to their mechanical features but also to their ability to convey play value while being employed in play. The last dimension of the toy experience (Heljakka, 2018) is the emotional or affective experience attained during play. Depending on the toy, each of these dimensions encompasses various affordances that are valuable for different play patterns.

Character toys, such as anthropomorphic plush creatures like teddy bears, afford affective play patterns—they call for actions like caring and nurturing. They are often viewed as friendly, approachable, and even 'huggable,' toys that evoke empathic responses in their owners. Furthermore, the teddy bear, like most dolls, may be anthropomorphized, or attributed human-like features.

The wide recognition, domestication, and accessibility of the teddy bear makes it a useful resource for players of many ages. Further, the physical stance of the toy depicts the bear in an upright sitting position, making it available for play scenarios and storytelling that involve camera technologies and visual and verbal narration.

It comes as no surprise that teddy bears, above other character toys or toys with facial features (Heljakka, 2013), have been widely employed in toy activism, or in playing for a cause, such as the teddy challenge discussed in this article. Toy activism, as formulated by Heljakka (2020), refers to harnessing character toys, such as dolls, action figures, and animal characters, including various soft toys, to make visible or to promote a political, ethical, or emphatic goal.

For players around the world, the global COVID-19 pandemic has involved the need to adjust to new ways of interaction while maintaining a safe social distance. As written in an OECD report on Policy Responses to the Coronavirus, 'While many of its implications, such as confinement-related psychological distress and social distancing measures, affect all of society, different age groups experience these impacts in distinct ways.' (OECD, 2020).

An interest in play patterns emerging during the early days of the COVID-19 health crisis led me to investigate the phenomenon of the teddy challenge—a form of pandemic toy play that, due to its hybrid nature involving traditional character toys, camera technologies, and sharing on social media, spread internationally in Nordic and Anglo-American territories. When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic became widespread in March 2020, the lockdown resulted in restrictions regarding spaces for play, and it emptied many cities. Very soon, however, teddy bears, or other soft toys started to appear in windows, and quickly thereafter, the phenomenon went viral on social media.

One of the categories of play identified by Roger Caillois is mimicry (1961). As a play meme or form of mimetic play, the teddy challenge represented a play pattern that is simple to mimic, replicate, and vary. By reviewing media texts on this transcultural and globally connecting play pattern that was being practiced simultaneously in multiple areas, and then by conducting analyses of player-created content on social media and of interviews with mature players, this two-phase study illustrates how playful human-beings mitigate the negative effects of isolation, and in difficult times, find a resolution through play that enhances their well-being.

The role of play in well-being

Play is a universal phenomenon with individual, social, and even intergenerational appeal. In order to sustain human health, play has been used in diverse ways, as part of therapy, and to maintain mental (cognitive and emotional), physical, and social well-being. Previous work on the role of play in human well-being accentuates its importance for individuals as well as for cultures. As play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith famously states, the opposite of play is not work, but depression. Renowned scholar of play, Stuart L. Brown asks, 'if play is lost or missing in a complex changing and demanding world, are there serious negative consequences, individually and culturally, that affect all who miss out on it?' (Brown, 2014, n.p.).

Brown lists some of the benefits of play, such as self-regulation, curiosity, increased perseverance, progressive mastery, and optimism. In contrast, rigidity in outlook and fixed ideologies are frequently symptoms of play deprivation, and prolonged and sustained play deprivation has major dire consequences for human competency, well-being, trust, empathy, sharing, cooperation, personal resiliency, self-regulation, sustained optimism, and more (Brown, 2014, n.p.).

Gordon (2014) suggests what she describes as the adaptive advantages of play: its vital role in the development of metacommunication, finding meaning in experience, emotional stability, flexibility in identity, creative expression, symbolic representation, the ability to form and communicate narratives, social bonding, and collaboration. These skills are extremely impactful on the individual's well-being and start to develop at a very early stage (Gordon, 2014).

Schaefer and Drewes (2014) have identified major therapeutic powers in play, stating that the impact of these powers is located across four areas: 1) communication, including enhancing self-expression; 2) emotional well-being, enabling stress management; 3) enhancement of social relationships; and 4) increase in personal strengths relating to creative problem solving, the capacity for resilience, or the ability to be happy or

successful again after something difficult or bad has happened (*resilience*, Cambridge dictionary, 2021).

These writers suggest that play brings benefits, advantages, and therapeutic powers, and thanks to these positive effects on human life, it may indeed be a strategy for survival or an avenue for dealing with difficult things (Heljakka, 2015), serving as an important outlet for people of all ages and abilities (WellSpring, 2020).

'During play, we entertain fantasies, break down preconceived notions, and become more socially and physically flexible. This enables us to navigate unfamiliar territory with greater finesse and ease. By playing, we foster empathy and relieve tension' (WellSpring, 2020, n.p.). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that play may be perceived as a resource with a significant role in preserving and enhancing human relations and well-being, particularly during challenging times.

Sutton-Smith writes about ludic liberation, a kind of adult play by neoliberal individuals, which, in his words, represents imagination and healing, but 'finds no base in churches, nations, or tribes, as in other religions, but rather centers on the personal and private experience of the individual' (Sutton-Smith, 2017, p. 235). 'Ludic', according to Caillois, describes goal-oriented and even competitive play, familiar from games (Caillois, 1961). This article strives to add support for the notion of *paidic liberation*—a form of non-competitive and creative play that proposes the opposite: an activity that gains its strength and purpose from an imaginative and socially shared experience—playing individually, but for the sake of togetherness and for a common good. Toy play during a pandemic may be seen in this light—extending beyond the individual and resulting in a voluntary, altruistic and intrinsically motivated action that is socially invigorating and leans toward the idea of paidic liberation.

Methodology

This study uses a two-stage qualitative approach that includes a previous analysis of online materials as well as interview data from seven respondents collected in the summer of 2020. After the World Health Organization announced the outbreak of a global pandemic in March 2020, the author started to collect online materials: newspaper articles and social media postings on a new phenomenon: the teddy challenge made public on Finnish and international newspaper websites. Altogether, the author included nine national newspaper articles or other online publications, four international newspaper articles, and 100 instances of photoplay on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The research material thus consists of international and national newspaper articles, other media material such as blogs, and photoplay (or toy photography) posted on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram during March and April 2020. These materials were collected by conducting an Internet search with the terms 'nallehaaste' and 'teddy challenge' (the most commonly used English term for the play pattern) and then scrutinized by conducting a thematic (visual and verbal) content analysis. While analyzing the research material, the author also paid attention to the terms and hashtags #nallejahti, and #bongaanalle ['teddy chase' and 'spot a teddy'] used in association with the photographs, posts, and articles.

The results of the initial analysis were published in May 2020, and those findings are now being used as the basis for the second phase of that study, which is the focus of this

article. Through seven interviews conducted online in July 2020, the author questioned interviewees (adult toy players) in Finland, U.K., and Singapore about their toy playing motives and habits during and after the lockdown period in spring 2020. The author first asked the participants to talk about their personal experience with the teddy challenge during spring and summer 2020. The participants, who were all female and between the ages of 30 and 75 years, were specifically asked about their awareness of the challenge and their possible participation. Second, the interviewees were asked to talk about their own toy play activities during March – June 2020. Third, the interviewees were asked to exemplify their play activities by sending chosen examples of photoplay (or toy photography) that they had been involved with during the pandemic. The interview materials and the photographs were analyzed by the author using thematic content analysis and grouped according to common themes. The data types and the methods used in the analyses in the consecutive phases of the study are summarized in Table 1.

First phase of study: the teddy challenge based on an analysis of toy photographs and media articles

The idea of the teddy challenge was to place teddy bears or other 'toy friends' in visible places, where they could be seen or spotted by others, as in an urban scavenger hunt. According to the web-based publication Inc., this play pattern originated from the popular children's storybook *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (1989) by British author Michael Rosen (Zeitlin, 2020). The narrative in Rosen's book was adapted from an

Table 1. Data types and methods used in the analyses.

Data	Analysis: First phase of study, March–April 2020
100 toy photographs, photoplay (or toy photography) posted on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram during March–April 2020 with the hashtag #nallejahti [teddy challenge]	The researcher conducted a visual content analysis on the materials by investigating *where* (indoors/outdoors); *and how the teddy/teddies were displayed* (posed and positioned); *how many teddies were in the photograph*, and *if there were recognizable elements of storytelling in the photographs*, such as combinations of props, clothing etc. (visual elements) or written messages (verbal elements).
13 media articles, including newspaper articles and other media materials such as blog writings (4 international and 9 Finnish) published March–April 2020	The researcher conducted a thematic analysis on the materials by investigating *how the media articles defined the teddy challenge*. This part of the research was reported in a publication (Heljakka, 2020).
	Analysis: Second phase of study, July 2020
7 qualitative interviews including a request for examples of photoplay (or toy photography) were conducted online with adult toy players (all female, aged 30–75 years) recruited from online toy player communities (social media; on Facebook and Instagram) in Finland, U.K., and Singapore	The researcher asked the following questions: 1. Did you participate in the teddy challenge in spring–summer 2020? 2. Tell about your toy play activities during March–June 2020? 3. Please send examples of photoplay created during the COVID-19 pandemic. (The interviewees were requested to send in examples of their own photoplay created during the COVID-19 pandemic.) The interview answers and instances of photoplay were coded using content analysis. The themes were then linked to the topics of resistance, resourcefulness, and resilience as identified in the first phase of the study.

American folksong telling the story of a family going on a bear hunt. As reported by the publisher, the book has sold over nine million copies worldwide (Eyre, 2016).

In newspaper articles, playing with toy displays involving teddy bears was identified as an outdoor game that was fun and safe. The play pattern was recognized in all 50 states of the US 'and at least 12 other countries' (Zeitlin, 2020), including Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

The news articles defined the teddy challenge as 'A sweet and silly game to comfort and entertain' (Zeitlin, 2020) and as a 'mass teddy bear hunt' or a collective scavenger hunt (AFP/Agency, 2020). According to Fortin (2020), it was 'a scavenger hunt suited for social distancing' that occurred in 'neighborhoods made empty' (Smith, 2020).

Understanding the teddy challenge as a form of play that includes all the aforementioned dimensions of the toy play experience—physical, fictional, functional, and affective—presented ample possibilities for 'everyday players' (Heljakka, 2013) to participate in the teddy challenge. At the same time, the challenge was built on a universal, physical plaything found in most homes.

The functional aspect of the teddy bears meant that they could easily be displayed in windows, the fictional dimension of the teddy bear, as a familiar and friendly toy character, enabled recognition, acceptance and relatability, and finally, the appearance of the soft and 'vulnerable' toy made it possible to communicate empathic messages delivered by the toy character as a stand-in, even an avatar, for the human player (Heljakka, 2012).

The teddy challenge, as reported in the news and media articles and in the photoplay on social media platforms, encompassed many aspects of object play, such as the social, creative, communicative, fantasy, and imaginative dimensions of playing with things, or toy play. Due to its replicability, re-playability, and visibility connecting indoor and outdoor playscapes, this mimetic form of play attracted the use of camera technologies and social media platforms. During the first phase of the pandemic, online and screen-based play activities gained momentum, even from the perspective of how physical toys and games can be played with to maintain a playful spirit despite the lack of physical closeness. Indeed, technology allows players to extend the play patterns associated with traditional, three-dimensional, and physical toys to digital and social playscapes (Figure 1). The nature of contemporary, object-based play, such as the teddy challenge, has thus evolved into hybrid play (Heljakka, 2016).

Second phase of study: the teddy challenge based on interviews with and photoplay by adult toy players

Play during the ongoing pandemic was informed by and mirrored actual world events. For example, young players frequently process current events through play, and engaging in play enables them to work through and express their feelings (WellSpring, 2020). As recreation centers and playgrounds were closed, for many, the terrain for play shrunk to the domestic sphere—interiors and gardens of homes. While many players resorted to audiovisual entertainment and games, some chose to engage with toys and to showcase their toy displays in visible places in their homes. The power of the toy medium in combination with the creative investment of the players detected in the first phase of the study demonstrated anthropomorphized and empathic gestures of leaning, handholding and

Figure 1. A mosaic of teddy challenge photographs posted on Instagram by Heidi Veräjäntausta, 2020.

hugging between the teddy bears and other 'toy friends' displayed in windows, and in this way, human behavior was projected onto the toys (Figure 1).

In the second phase of the study, the author sought to understand whether similar themes would emerge from the interview data. The underlying assumption was that toys displayed in window-screens had an activating role as agents persuading and inviting passersby to social play, and the teddy challenge emerged. Moreover, it is possible to consider how participation in the teddy challenge occurred in multiple, parallel, but sometimes different ways, based on an analysis of the media articles and photoplay. This occurred either through the action of an adult producer in making a toy display in the window (object play), by joining in as a viewing player (adult or child) through aesthetic enjoyment of the displays in the name of paidic (open-ended) play, or by photographing the displays and sharing them on social media platforms (photoplay). For example, interviewee 'Heidi' described how she joined the challenge by spotting teddies, photographing the displays, and then sharing them on social media: 'I have spotted teddies of the teddy challenge in the windows of local businesses in my hometown. A joy for adults as well! I have shared the pictures on my social media channels' (Interviewee 'Heidi', see Figures 1 and 4).

Quotes from the interviews that demonstrate the themes identified in the first phase of the study, namely resistance, resourcefulness, and resilience, are discussed in greater detail in reference to player interviews in the following sections of this article.

Resistance: fighting the negative effects of social distance through play

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has presented players of all ages with feelings of loneliness and isolation and with numerous constraints on their play activities, especially in

terms of social distancing. But times of crisis can also be times of resistance to the negative effects of a difficult situation through a willingness to play and to express playfulness. Resistance refers to the act of fighting against something that is attacking one, or refusing to accept something (*resistance*, Cambridge dictionary, 2021).

For some of the adult toy players interviewed for this study, toy play represented a fantasy-laden escape from ordinary worlds into the unordinary, while resisting the negative effects the crisis may cause. Interviewee 'Hannele K', who did not participate in the challenge as a displayer, claimed that the teddies visible in other people's windows gave her joy. She explained how she was enthralled by seeing toys in other peoples' windows:

> I didn't participate in the teddy challenge because we live on the 4th floor, I was thinking that it is useless. […] Our chimpanzees are really curious toys, and they have been looking outside from various windows (Figure 2). I was thrilled to see toys in [other peoples'] windows during the worst pandemic time, and they gave me joy. Otherwise, I didn't change my toy style/behavior during this difficult time, I took photos, as usual, nothing to do with pandemic though, because I didn't want to think about it too much. (Interviewee 'Hannele K')

What created interest for some players, motivating them to join in the challenge as displayers and storytellers, was its wide news coverage and its appearance on social media. Interviewee 'Molla' explained how a newspaper article informed her about the teddy challenge:

> I first read about the teddy challenge in the national newspaper when the COVID-19 quarantine started. Then [pictures of] teddies started to appear on Facebook. Soon the local newspaper published its first teddy pictures. I became even more excited about it, when I read in the story that the idea was to cheer up children after the schools closed, who would spot teddies during their outings. (Interviewee 'Molla')

Play is dialogical—it is more a dialogue rather than a straightforward expression (Henricks, 2017, p. 11). Whereas toy play activities, such as displaying teddy bears in windows as a form of pandemic toy play, may happen as a personal and solitary activity involving one player only, it is possible to see how these displays were created for the purpose of playing together. A prominent theme that arose in the analysis of the media articles and the social media postings during the first phase of the research was how, through playing for the common good, the teddy challenge promoted the social aspects of play,

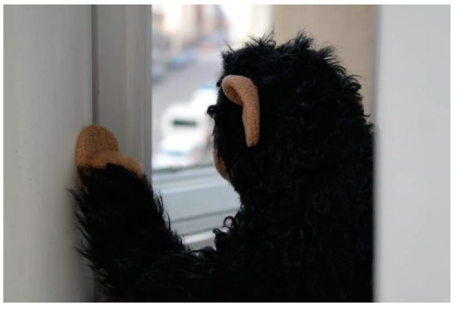

Figure 2. Hannele's chimpanzee, a curious toy, looking through the apartment window. Photograph by Hannele K, 2020.

Figure 3. Interviewee Pinkkisfun joined the teddy challenge with a 'Rilakkuma' teddy. Photograph by Pinkkisfun, 2020.

in particular inclusivity and communality. In this way, players resisted the effects of loneliness and feelings of isolation.

In the interviews conducted for the second phase of research, interviewee 'Pinkkisfun,' who participated in the challenge as a displayer (Figure 3) found the communality of the challenge very positive. The following interview quote illustrates how making a teddy publicly visible in the window required resistance to ideas presented by family members:

> I spotted teddy bears in the windows, and what delighted me most of all in them was the communality [of play]. Of course, I had my own teddy in the window, even though my husband [was] opposed to this. (Interviewee 'Pinkkisfun')

Interviewee 'Jennifer', who said she had suffered from the virus herself, noted that she had not joined as a displayer of teddies, but as a passerby who experienced the challenge as conveying a positive message expressing empathy and solidarity and aimed at older generations who were at high risk of being affected by the virus:

> From my own perspective I felt hope and it made me feel like all will be good. It was a very kind gesture to see so many bears around, especially after having the virus. I think for older people, or the ones at high risk, it must feel like a beautiful message implying that people think of them and that they hope they stay safe. (Interviewee 'Jennifer')

Overall, people resisted the negative aspects of isolation through play, which included being spectators of teddy displays in windows, participating in the challenge as a maker of displays, and appreciating the communal aspects of the challenge. These playful ways of mitigating a mentally burdensome situation brought positivity to the interviewees' lives through the teddies' gesturing empathy and communality.

Resourcefulness: creativity across generations

A significant part of the affordances related to character toys, such as teddy bears, dolls, and action figures, are the characteristics that make them tools for creative and

imaginative play. 'Creativity has always been a linchpin of intergenerational programs and now more than ever we need to think creatively on how to build intergenerational relationships' (Generations together, 2020). The roles played by creativity, responsivity, simplicity, and patience are especially important in challenging times. Creativity, in fact, is closely linked to resourcefulness, it is 'the ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties, or the ability to make decisions and act on your own' (*resourcefulness*, Cambridge dictionary, 2021), understood here as mental flexibility—a key characteristic of playful individuals.

Playing with toys enables self-expression. It may manifest as a form of object play, in which the player employs and manipulates various materials (physical or digital), together with one's imagination and creativity. The photoplay representing displays made with teddy bears and other toy friends demonstrates the use of one or many character toys, themes and a multitude of different props and other materials suitable for object play, such as clothing for the toys.

Teddies, together with other character toys, can be styled with clothing and posed in different ways, presenting them as being in different scenarios and portraying playful narratives in the toy displays. An example is interviewee Heidi's photograph, which she had posted on social media with the caption: 'Teddies are having tea. Playful!' (Figure 4).

For interviewee 'Molla', her resourcefulness was expressed through toy play associated with the teddy challenge, which resulted in her making variations to her display according to current themes, such as Mother's Day (celebrated in May in Finland) and inspired by real-life events:

> I always dressed the teddy bear in a different way depending on a topical theme: during Mothers' Day, there was a large worksite at the corner near my house and the teddy got a safety vest to wear. (Interviewee 'Molla')

The spring of 2020 was cold and dry in Finland, which may have influenced the extent to which the toy displays were also made outdoors. Teddy bears were hung on trees and displayed in gardens and shopwindows, where they could be seen by passersby on their walks maybe even offering a figurative hug (see hand-written sign on the teddy bear in Figure 5, 'halipulan paikkaaja' meaning 'provider of hugs for those in need'). Moreover, the restrictions on mobility were not as strict in Finland as they were in

Figure 4. Teddies having tea. Photograph by Heidi Veräjäntausta, 2020.

Figure 5. Teddy bear with a sign saying, 'provider of hugs for those in need',' photographed by Heidi Veräjäntausta.

many other countries. In this way, the dis-*playing* could be extended from indoor spaces to outdoor environments, which resulted in spontaneous interactions between the dis-players and the viewers of the teddy challenge. As interviewee 'Molla' explained: 'The teddy started to live its own life and made me joyful despite the miserable quarantine. The best things [about the teddy challenge] were the 'Thank yous' and conversations with the passersby' (Interviewee 'Molla').

Overall, the players interviewed were resourceful both in how they interpreted the toy displays made by others, and how they acted on the possibility of playing themselves in the closeness of their homes, by displaying teddies in the gardens, or by taking their toy out while paying respect to the safety measures. In this way, they prompted dialogs with people and the environment, probably in ways that would have been unthinkable prior to the pandemic.

(Playful) Resilience: toy play as a coping mechanism

The last of the three facets of play identified during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic is the resilience achieved by coping with the situation through one's own toy play. The term *resilience* in the psychological literature refers to the capability to adjust and endure in stressful situations. It is described as 'a process to harness resources in order to sustain well-being', and the idea of progress—moving forward—is an important component of resilience (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). If personal playful resilience is understood as a quality of individuals who deliberately and determinedly employ their playfulness in order to relate, react, and pro-act in overcoming mental stress, then collective playful resilience, which manifests in socially motivating and engaging behavior such as collective toy activism, helps larger groups to cope with stressful times caused by constraints on entire nations (Heljakka, 2020). This collective resilience was demonstrated in the way interviewee 'Jennifer' noted post-it notes that appeared in the windows of one particular area of the city where she lives: 'I saw the [challenge] in Kallio [city area] where people were using post-it notes to write big messages, mostly saying 'Tsemppiä' ['Hang-in there!'] (Interviewee 'Jennifer').

Playing during the pandemic manifested itself in the activities of U.K. interviewee 'Les' when she took her toy Haisuli out on excursions to the post box, and then imagined the toy character to be mischievous. For example, she described the need to keep Haisuli from putting letters into the wrong bin (Figure 6). She said:

> For about eight weeks my only excursion was walking to the post box and back to post my eBay orders. People out walking their dogs saw me take it [the photoplay]. They saw me sanitize the post box just so that Haisuli could touch it safely. Not as silly as it sounds. Although Haisuli is gross already, I don't want him bringing Covid home. The concept was that the dog bin and the post box are next to each other, and he might pretend he didn't hear properly and put the letters in the wrong bin. He's so naughty.' ('Les')

The quote illustrates how imaginative and mobile toy-play was when faced with practical and necessary precautions due to the risks of playing outdoors. For interviewee 'Kewty-pie' the guidelines for wearing a mask when moving in outdoor public spaces in Singapore resulted in her customized Blythe doll to consider whether it was OK for her to remove the mask while enjoying an ice cream (Figure 7). More importantly, the examples of 'Les' and 'Kewty-pie' show how the toys presented the possibility of showing signs of playful resilience by engaging in humorous toy photography in parallel with daily human tasks, despite the many constraints on mobility present during lockdown.

In the teddy challenge, conceptualized here as intergenerational play (or play between generations), the players were not segregated by age. During spring 2020 and during the quarantines of many seniors, the teddies in the windows may, apart from mobile phones, have been one of the most important tools for grandparents to send messages to their toy-literate grandchildren, to say, 'There will be a time for play together once the situation is resolved; let's wait together for that day.' In her interview, 'Molla' reflects on a meeting with a grandparent who wanted to take a photograph of her teddy, displayed in a tree growing in her garden, so that she would be able to share it with her grandchildren:

> One incident in particular during Mothers' Day was touching. An older lady came into my yard and asked if she could photograph [the teddy, which was displayed on a tree branch].

Figure 6. Character toy 'Haisuli' photographed by interviewee 'Les' in England.

Figure 7. Photographic examples of adult toy play shared on social media during lockdown by 'Kewty-pie', 2020.

> Then she told me how much she misses her grandchildren, whom she could not meet. But now she would send a teddy picture to them with her loving greetings.

Playing in uncertain times, in this way, promotes the possibility of empathy. In fact, as the examples of complex and affectionate relationships between the toys and their owners and their forms of toy play during the pandemic demonstrate, the toys are more than our companions or their precursors—in some cases they come to represent their owners by following them through their daily routines. By being an intimately trusted confidant and by taking part in pandemic toy play, the toys participate in the fight against apathy and passivity by playing the role of our representatives, our active agents who deliver experiences of joy and hope, both key factors in playful resilience. In sum, playful resilience during the pandemic is assisted by toy play messages and by toy activists with a serious intention—to sustain mental flexibility and to generate communal well-being and trust in survival across generations.

Discussion

Play helps to make life worth living, says Brian Sutton-Smith. In his thinking, this leads logically into the concept that optimism and flexibility are essential correlates of play, which in turn, means that players can confidently make up their own positive alternatives to their present struggles for survival with the shocks, anger, fear, disgust, and sadness of the primary emotions we encounter in everyday life (Sutton-Smith, 2017, p. 224).

Playing is vital for many reasons, and it is crucial in times of crisis. It is a form of engagement with the world and its offerings and a way to increase one's well-being, whether mental (cognitive or emotional), physical or social. Engaging in play can lead to increased feelings of pleasure and enjoyment; and it can support emotion regulation, learning, and creativity (Lester & Russell, 2010). By retaining a playful and creative mindset, *homo ludens*—the playing human being—has survived emotionally burdensome crises such as wars.

Toy play in a time of global pandemic, such as presented in this article, is understood to involve both children and adults and consequently, suggests the importance of the toy as a medium for intergenerational play. Toy activism, as suggested in this article, functions as an avenue for players to express their participation in discussions around societal issues, concerns, and crises. Mulgan (2020) has raised the issue of the declining social imagination. The teddy challenge demonstrated an instance of play involving collective creativity and social imagination, which aimed to counteract feelings of isolation and loneliness between different players and generations by showing support and solidarity.

Playing during a pandemic, manifests as both an individual (solitary) and communal (social) activity: It is important to note how the making of physical toy displays sparked the individual creativity of the players, but how their actions were carried out with the greater community and its well-being in mind. This observation is supported by the written messages attached to the toy displays encouraging passersby, for example, to 'hang in there!' Again, digital participation in the playing amplified the impact of the physical displays as they were made visible for a larger audience through sharing on social media platforms. As shown in the example of interviewee 'Jennifer', she spotted teddy bears in the windows of a particular neighborhood, which made her think about the well-being of that community. The promotion of social cohesion and connectedness through the teddy challenge provided an avenue for a voluntary and open-ended play pattern to become an invitation to actively co-create, involving anyone willing to participate by joining in the playing. Through digital and social sharing, the teddy challenge developed into a technologically mediated form of play, fostering both individual and communal resilience and well-being.

Earlier work on pandemic play proposed the concept of ludo-unity (in contrast to *ludodiversity*, which points to the regional forms of play-related behaviors, see Heljakka, 2020) to exemplify forms of play that aim for social cohesion. The imaginative acts of displaying physical objects and socially sharing photography (or photoplay) and a hybrid play culture support and channel a strong, positive message of ludo-unity: 'By playing together we will survive this together.'

Of significance here is to note the hybrid and multidimensional nature of the toy play rather than to have a simplistic view of play as either a materially oriented or digital activity—or an activity of interest to children only. Critiques on screen-based play have been made, for example, by play scholar Stuart Brown. Rather than spending time with mobile technologies, active screen-free play is encouraged (2014, n.p.). This one-sided view of technologically enhanced play, as well as another observation made by Brown (2014) regarding the decline in intergenerational play and 'family' games, have been challenged by the hybridity of the teddy challenge as presented in this article. The teddy challenge presents itself as a hybrid form of intergenerational play, involving first, play with physical playthings as well as play outdoors and in digital playscapes. Second, it involves both children and adults, and third it includes both solitary and social types of playing (Figure 8). In playing the teddy challenge, open-ended play patterns evolved from more structured and rule-bound play and playing with teddy bears and other toy-friends developed from solitary, singular, and individual acts into mimetic social behavior, drawing inspiration from other players and from instances of play both offline and online.

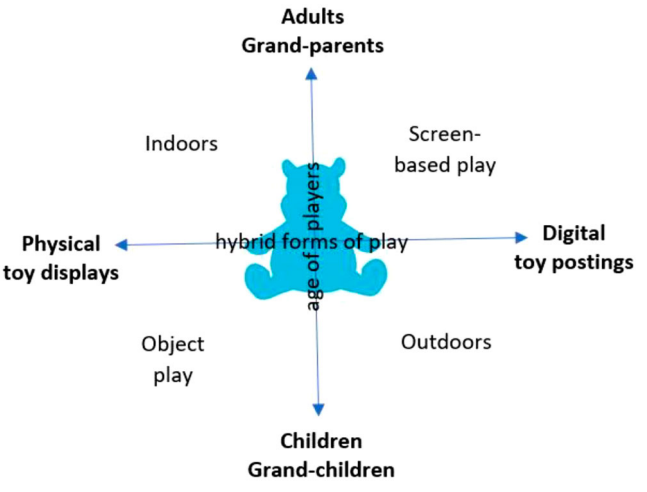

Figure 8. Hybridity and intergenerationality of the teddy challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

In his most recent work, Sutton-Smith discusses the modern movement toward play as an item of largely individual subjectivity rather than an item of group life (Sutton-Smith, 2017, p. 234). In contrast, as shown in this article, in times of a health crisis that encapsulates many into the domestic sphere or limits people's physical closeness to each other, playing together may bring us closer to each other despite the limitations of social distancing. The practice of pandemic toy play evolved through resistance, resourcefulness, and resilience as reactions to restrictions on physical closeness and the consequences of social distancing. The study described in this article shows how play moves us in terms of affect and physical and social mobility, and in this way promotes overall well-being: where there is play, there is mental flexibility, belief in a brighter future and a willingness to contribute to the common good.

Pandemic play employing teddy bears and other toy friends illustrates how play-things displayed, narrated, photo-played and shared on social media functioned to counteract experiences of loneliness and isolation by communicating positive playful messages of emotional survival. Players of different ages joined in the teddy challenge as displayers, spectators, or social media activists, demonstrating how toy activism for a common cause may lead to many forms of play, including intergenerational play that enhances well-being. As a public form of toy play, the teddy challenge sent out its message to grandparents and grandchildren, as well as to anyone interested in being invited to participate in this form of play, and translated messages of support and solidarity into the form of physical toy displays, sometimes strengthened with verbal messages.

In our world, writes Sutton-Smith, play promotes the immediate liveliness of being alive and keeps us emotionally vibrant and capable of joy in an otherwise hostile and frightening world (Sutton-Smith, 2017). Pandemic toy play, as demonstrated by the teddy challenge, promoted empathy and solidarity through maintaining contact between players regardless of their age or distance from each other.

Figure 9. The toy photograph by interviewee 'Jennifer' features amigurumis (crocheted character toys) and a message communicating the possibility of growth in challenging times.

To conclude with a quote from Thomas Henricks: 'Players are defiant in their belief that they will not be victims of their own life circumstances; they proclaim their ability to flourish amidst the direst conditions' (Henricks, cited in Sutton-Smith, 2017, p. 16). We will end with a prediction on what the future of play will hold: the 'new normal' brings with it new play patterns, one of which, the author speculates, will be increasing interest in the collective employment of playthings in imagination and cognition, as well as in physical and mobile toy play (Heljakka & Ihamäki, 2020). 'Innovativeness, good humor, irony and not taking oneself too seriously are byproducts of a playful heritage', writes Stuart Brown (2014, n.p.). Essentially, play *is* survival. With the social imaginings invested and both the physical and digital activities made perceivable in intergenerational and hybrid forms of toy play such as the teddy challenge, it is possible to see that there is not only belief and optimism (Figure 9.) but also trust for better times ahead, despite the uncertain future.

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