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FROM SCREEN TIME TO **SCREEN PLAY**

Children playing together online and storying through the screen

By **Rebecca Horrace & Karen Wohlwend**

*W*idespread angst over *screen time*—the amount of time children spend with digital devices—restricts young children’s opportunities to play with digital literacies at home and at school. Strict screen time limits focus on the potential harm of passive viewing during young children’s screen interactions as their play online is often described as passive rather than active. It is true that commercial apps or video games are largely designed by adults who mediate the space, the rules, and the stories. Rarely do young children have the chance to collaborate with other children and create their own stories on their own terms as coplayers and producers.

But what if technology concerns shifted to focus on what is missing in children's limited screen experiences? What if there were child-friendly interactive options that could help develop increasingly immersive literacies of augmented realities and digital futures?

In this article, a Zoom playgroup creates a playspace for coauthoring stories on the screens at our fingertips on phones, tablets, and computers. When pretend play goes online, it becomes a powerful generator of live-action texts that young children create when they play stories together. We use an example from Rebecca's (first author) research on online imaginative playgroups to examine how offering screen *play*, rather than stressing over screen *time*, allows children to create stories with their favorite toys and play *through* the screen.

Playing together on Zoom

In 2020, the world changed. The COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for dramatic technological advances and digital reliance as people socially isolated, primarily interacting through online platforms such as Zoom. With pandemic restrictions on social gatherings, there were few out-of-the-house options, and many families turned to technology: online games, YouTube videos, social media, and so forth.

As many teachers and educators learned during the pandemic, online spaces were designed by adults to keep children occupied rather than maintain social relationships fostered in face-to-face play. Few spaces expand a child's playroom to bring friends together virtually while encouraging imaginative play with physical belongings that strengthen children's connections to one another through sharing of their favorite toys, media, and stories. To open a virtual space for child-directed play, Rebecca created online imaginative playgroups, open-ended play sessions on Zoom where children could interact with peers in the ways *they* wanted, by playing with toys, producing stories together, and improvising across their screens.

To begin, Rebecca contacted other parents with similar concerns and soon had a playgroup of four boys, 8–10 years old, from two Western U.S. states. The

boys loved playing with Ninjago toys, a popular LEGO franchise, so Rebecca selected it as a unifying theme while the content and direction of each 90-minute weekly session was up to them. In the first session's informal "show-and-tell" interaction, the boys simultaneously brought their LEGO constructions and Ninjago playsets close to their computer screens. However, as the sessions progressed, interactive play narratives developed and screen barriers dissolved. For example, one LEGO dragon battle crossed digital barriers when a dragon shot pretend fire "through" the screen and the other boys reacted instantly by removing their dragon's LEGO limbs to show their dragon had been injured.

Children in this playgroup were knowledgeable experts about the entire Ninjago franchise who pooled their shared understandings to build a more complex story together. They seriously discussed their favorite television series, breaking down storylines and pushing further to innovate on character identities and formulaic plots. As children manipulated media elements through LEGO construction and storying, play and literacy opportunities continued long after viewing had occurred, strengthening shared meaning-making and the group's sense of belonging.

Benefits of online imaginative playgroups

Online imaginative playgroups are child-led and have no structure, no end goal, and no avatar (unless children create one during play). Children negotiate their own rules. There are no advertisements and nothing to interrupt or co-opt the children's imagination. Instead, playgroups offer an engaging experience in which children meet in a "Zoom room" and play as if they are physically together. In these playgroups, players cocreate a story moment to moment through fluid storymaking negotiations that naturally unfold: Whose toy will be the favorite character? What can this character do and say? What will happen next in the story? It is all decided without digital games or authority figure guidance. Children are in charge of the play and the storytelling.

Similar to Karen's (second author) *Literacy Playshop* curricular model,

online imaginative playgroups develop key abilities needed for storying and collaborating using new technologies:

- **Digital literacy skills and innovator dispositions** as students test the capabilities of tech tools (e.g., use Zoom and its features, open alternate tabs) and explore screen conventions (e.g., manipulate the screen to share their toy versus their face, play *through* the screen)
- **Collaboration** as coplayers negotiate decisions about what they get to play and explore
- **Cohesive storylines** with logical plot actions and character reactions (e.g., as in the cause and effect in the dragon play mentioned previously)
- **Socio-emotional responses** as children engage with one another while expanding their **peer communities**

Setting up online imaginative playgroups

Online imaginative playgroups can be developed with minimal tools: All you need is a digital device, internet access, a video-conferencing application (e.g., FaceTime, Zoom), and three to four "remote" participants—whether from another classroom in your school, in your district, or in a different state. Think "screen pals"—a real-time, play-centered digital upgrade on "pen pals."

Although we may be back to "normal" routines again, our post-pandemic world has expanded our options for communicating digitally in more embodied ways, and catapulted us toward increasingly augmented realities and futures. More highly interactive and collaborative digital play, as in the playgroup described here, prepares children to play past the screen, expanding the constrained digital literacies typically offered for young children.

These playgroups create meaningful and developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to reach out, share, and story together across locations, whether elementary classrooms, home-schooling settings, or after-school programs. No longer must we be physically local to be locally present as we interact with one another. ■