Play and Curation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Interview with Christopher Bensch, Andrew Borman, Michelle Parnett-Dwyer, and Nicolas Ricketts

Christopher Bensch is vice president for collections and chief curator at The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, NY. He oversees the acquisition of and care for the world's most comprehensive collection of playthings. He also serves as the primary spokesperson for the National Toy Hall of Fame. Andrew Borman is digital games curator at The Strong. He collects digital games and coordinates the museum's digital game preservation efforts. Michelle Parnett-Dwyer is curator at The Strong. She collects and interprets a comprehensive collection of toys and dolls. Nic Ricketts is curator at The Strong. He acquires and interprets the museum's collection of board games, puzzles, and other nonelectronic games, as well as photographs, art, and paper ephemera. In this interview, The Strong's curators discuss the impact of the pandemic on play and the museum's collecting and preservation efforts.
Key words: distance play; electronic games and COVID-19; medicine and toys; play at home; play during a pandemic; toys and diversity; toy industry and pandemics; toy scarcity in a pandemic

American Journal of Play: The year 2020 will long be remembered as a time when a global pandemic shuttered schools, museums, playgrounds, and many other spaces where people gathered to play. Nevertheless, play has persisted in vital and important ways. How have you played during this challenging period?

Christopher Bensch: Two major sources of play in my life are cooking and gardening. I treasured these at-home activities as they became even larger parts of my experience in 2020 because they let me immerse myself in practical, physical, and tactile experiences. In the midst of those activities, I could concentrate on being in the moment—that ideal state of "flow" that happens in the best types of play. When gardening diminished with the onset of fall and winter weather, food—planning for it, shopping for it, preparing it, enjoying it, cleaning up after it (less playful)—had an even

American Journal of Play, volume 13, number 1 © The Strong
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larger role and gave me a daily and weekly rhythm when sometimes every day felt like "Blursday."

Andrew Borman: Having a young child at home, play has been challenging during the pandemic. We have brought outside play indoors as much as possible, playing catch, going down the slide, and chasing each other, all while trying not to disrupt the neighbors in our building. Personally, I have increasingly played online video games more than I have in the past few years, with titles like *Mario Kart Tour* and its high-score challenge taking the place of in-person events.

Michelle Parnett-Dwyer: I have a toddler and a preschooler at home, so there has been no shortage of things to do. In the summer months, we spent a lot of time outdoors playing with our puppy, jumping on the trampoline, taking walks, and exploring parts of Rochester. Anything to get the excess energy out. A few generous neighbors left rows of bikes and ride-ons out for kids, so they took a few novelties out for a spin—a pink retro chopper tricycle and a Radio Flyer Inchworm.

The colder months have been spent ice skating and crafting. I have found inspiration from other parents and educators of preschoolers on social media. I am drawn to people who bring nature into the playroom. We have crafted with sticks, stones, and leaves.

I have especially enjoyed implementing the ideas in *The Montessori Toddler* by Simone Davies. These activities are based on developing the whole child and focus on five main areas: eye-hand coordination, arts and crafts, language, practical life, and music and movement. Davies provides a chart of activities based on age. I also love the aesthetics of these activities—simple, natural, and practical.

Nicolas Ricketts: In warmer weather, my play often includes chores that might seem like work to some. In summer I updated some exterior house painting. Besides that, I have an inexpensive collectible auto and I enjoy driving and tinkering with that by myself. And I enjoy work in the garden and cycling. In cooler weather, my partner and I play the usual board and card games. And we have been known to binge watch television series. Play really did not change much for me.

AJP: How has the toy industry responded to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Parnett: The toy industry has responded in a variety of thoughtful and proactive ways to the pandemic. Some toy companies responded directly to the immediate needs caused by COVID-19. For example, Crazy Aaron's shifted

their focus from Thinking Putty to hand sanitizer. Disney Parks donated 150,000 rain ponchos to MedShare, a nonprofit organization that sources and delivers medical supplies to communities in need, and one hundred thousand N95 masks to the states of New York, California, and Florida.

In addition to their charitable contributions, companies like Mattel and Hasbro launched digital platforms that provided brand-related activities and content, play-from-home ideas, and tools for care givers to help kids cope with all the changes that 2020 brought. One of my favorite resources was Playmobil's five-minute video that explained COVID-19 in an accessible way for children. We also made use of the Sago Mini app, which provides numeracy, literacy, and problem-solving activities for preschoolers.

When I think of the toy industry, I also think of independent small businesses. Sadly, many toy stores were unable to keep their doors open. However, some had the resources to bring play to people with creative order taking, curb-side pick-up, and product bundles geared toward particular interests, ages, and subject areas.

Bensch: I have appreciated seeing how traditional tabletop play—especially board games and puzzles—enjoyed a resurgence almost from day one of the pandemic. As time has worn on and I think lots of people have become less enchanted by their screens, those analog sorts of play have a special appeal.

Reading about toy trends, I was struck by how this period has resulted in fewer new licensed characters. For one thing, there are not new blockbuster movies at theaters to spin off toys and products. With pop culture characters, as there is with food, people are craving comfort and returning to favorites from years gone by.

AJP: Are there any toys or playthings that have proven particularly popular during the pandemic?

Parnett: In some ways, it has been a good year for the toy industry because parents are constantly seeking new ways to entertain their children. Care givers have been especially interested in toys with educational value to supplement distance learning and limit time in front of the TV. The industry reported a 31 percent increase in sports toys like scooters, skateboards, and skates.

There has also been a growing demand for toys that focus on inclusivity and diversity. Doll designers have done a great job diversifying their portfolio. The Ollie Ella Dinkum dolls and Paola Reina MiniKane dolls are baby dolls that come in a variety of skin colors. Dinkum dolls are soft and gender neutral, while MiniKane are vinyl and anatomically correct. Healthy

Roots, The Fresh Dolls, and Fashionista Barbie have proved popular, as well as Lottie Dolls, which include a doll with autism, a doll with a cochlear implant, and a doll with dwarfism.

The pandemic has driven an interest in unboxing and collectibles. Social media influencers are pushing a lot of purchases. Adults are finding gratification in scrolling images of people's collections of toys, dolls, and games. It is a way to escape everyday stress and dwell in nostalgia. There has also been a renewed interest in dollhouses and miniatures. Adults are building these incredibly detailed miniature houses. *The New York Times* even published a piece called, "The Dollhouses of Instagram: Instagram-inspired enthusiasts are making their interior-design dreams real—only 12 times smaller." Imagine the magnitude of having your hobby published in *The New York Times*! We are reminded that dollhouses were originally an adult-driven hobby intended for display and, in some cases, pedagogy.

AJP: What about board games and puzzles?

Ricketts: Jigsaw puzzles enjoyed a comeback from the start of the pandemic, as homebound families searched for safe, indoor activities. I have heard reports that several puzzle manufacturers ran out of stock during the initial shutdown and could not meet demands until they called employees back. Individuals posted puzzles they had completed free for the taking on social media sites or traded with other puzzlers. And rental puzzles became a thing again. Game manufacturers, too, saw a gradual uptick in sales. They also felt their stocks dwindling as work forces were furloughed. I believe that quarantined families were willing to try new types of games, like Euro-games (European-style tabletop games often focused on the acquisition of resources or economics), and sales increased across all game types.

AJP: What affect has the pandemic had on the video game industry?

Borman: The pandemic has had an enormous impact on the video game industry. Many developers were forced to delay the release of their games. Some developers have noted success in shifting to a work-from-home environment, while others have struggled or taken longer to become comfortable—particularly in cases where child care is not available. Console game development also requires specialized software and hardware, and since new consoles were launched in November 2020, this has placed added pressure on both studios and hardware manufacturers at a time when they need to produce more hardware and new games.

Toward the beginning of the pandemic, new hardware to play games

was difficult to find. Consoles that had been readily available for years were suddenly flying off shelves. Computer hardware, including peripherals like keyboards, webcams, and even chairs, were hard to find throughout the year as many people, including a whole wave of new game players, needed equipment. And with production constraints due to the virus, retailers were unable to meet consumer demand.

With more people at home, sales have done well. Video game industry revenues in 2020 reportedly exceeded that of the movie and sports industries combined, which were hard hit by the pandemic. Player engagement on multiplayer titles increased year-over-year as well, although much of the current reporting focuses on the early months of the pandemic. Beyond sales, there has been a surge of interest on live streaming sites such as Twitch.tv and other streaming platforms as many people having already bought equipment for online meetings.

It is unclear what the impact of the shift from in-person events to online will have in the coming years. Game Developers Conference, E3, Gamescom, and other industry events are extremely important for many developers, as they meet with publishers and other groups to plan future releases and potential opportunities. And while online conferencing tools are great, they cannot replace all aspects of the in-person events.

AJP: Can you tell us more about some of the most popular video games during this period?

Borman: Launched in March 2020, Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* broke series records. Players move onto a deserted island, which quickly becomes less deserted as other animals move in. At a time when it felt like the real world was out of control, *Animal Crossing* was both relaxing and engaging, allowing players to explore and build their island at their own pace. With widespread stay-at-home orders, players could also connect with each other online through their islands, where they could visit and socialize with one another.

Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout is quite different from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* but also quite popular. Developed by Mediatonic, *Fall Guys* is an online battle royale game in which the last person standing wins. The game takes place across a series of minigames, played like a game show. Online streaming of the title helped grow the game's fanbase, as thousands of people watched *Fall Guys*, with special events like TwitchRivals and GrandPooBear's FallMania awarding monetary prizes to the winners of the

events. The ability to quickly pick up and play, along with the satisfaction of being the last survivor, made *Fall Guys* an instant hit.

Another important game has been *Among Us*. Developed by Innersloth LLC, it was actually released back in 2018, but found a new audience during the pandemic. Taking place in space, the game play itself draws from other social deduction games like *Werewolf*, in that players must work together to figure out who among them is an imposter, before jettisoning them out of the spaceship, hopefully without killing an innocent player. The imposters have the goal of killing other players, all without getting caught. Players can discuss what they saw others doing and if they saw anything suspicious. The game skyrocketed in popularity in summer 2020, first among players in South Korea, Mexico, and Brazil. Unlike many games where socialization is merely an option, it is required for *Among Us*, connecting players in a way many other games cannot.

Fitness games have also proven particularly popular. Nintendo is no stranger to excergaming, having released Wii Fit back in 2007. The company's *Ring Fit Adventure* for Nintendo Switch uses a special ring-shaped controller and leg strap, coupled with the console's Joy-Con controllers, to track player activity. The Ring-con controller detects strain as players push, pull, and move it around, with the leg strap setup tracking lower movements. As gyms began to close due to Covid-19, *Ring Fit Adventure* sales took off and, like many other pieces of game hardware, began selling out, becoming one of the console's best-selling games.

AJP: With so much interest in playthings related to the pandemic itself, have children and adults always played with toys and games related to health and medicine? Are there are other earlier examples of playthings related to health and epidemics in The Strong's vast collection?

Parnett: Play also helps kids make sense of the world around them. Manufacturers have long created playthings related to health and medicine. One of the earliest examples in the museum's holdings is Martha Chase's "hospital dolls" or "sanitary dolls" from around 1910. In addition to dolls for play, Chase created hospital dolls to teach young mothers and girls about how to care for babies. Hospitals and schools used them to train medical personnel, as well.

Other highlights include several doctor and nurse playsets such as Transogram Medicine Chest (ca. 1955), Foxy Doctor's play kit (1948), and Little Army Nurse (ca. 1940), and nurse and doctor action figures and dolls like Nurse Julie (1969).

Ricketts: The National Toy Hall of Fame inductee and board game, Candy Land is a great example of a plaything that emerged out of a previous epidemic. It was directly inspired by the middle twentieth-century polio epidemic, which reached its height in 1955. Schoolteacher Eleanor Abbott was confined to a polio ward in the late 1940s and drew the game on brown paper to help occupy the youngest children also quarantined in the ward. Children were especially vulnerable to the disease. Abbott's game was innovative as it required only color recognition and counting to advance the play. Thus, it taught these skills while it encouraged socialization and inspired imaginary escape to a sweet destination. Reportedly, some children may have played it during their infrequent and brief breaks from the confines of an iron lung—the machines that allowed seriously ill patients to breathe—the only time they could sit up and move. If so, the sweet fantasy element may have provided an imagined escape for these children. Though parents grew weary of repeated games, children loved it from the start. And the game, through countless editions and more recently in electronic variations, has remained a strong-selling game since.

As for more recent games, the one that comes to mind first is designer Matt Leacock's 2008 game Pandemic, which inspired an ongoing series of expansions and award-winning versions. While it partially may have been a case of a game carrying the right name at the right time, Pandemic got new press through social media in 2020. The game's players are scientific "experts" attempting to prevent the world from succumbing to one of several global viruses, using a world map as a game board. There are many other "medical" precursors to this game, mostly European-style games. And a few contemporary games, inspired by Covid-19 carry closer associations, such as 2020's Covid-19, Bacterium, and Anxiety Attack. But Pandemic certainly found new audiences.

Bensch: It strikes me that World War II also created an interest in the role that nurses held during that conflict and generated related playthings. In part, that may have arisen out of the gender divide of the time—boys could play soldier but girls needed to play nurse as a supporting role.

AJP: What about socially distant play? The pandemic has made playing from a distance a regular occurrence, but are there historical precedents for this kind of play?

Bensch: The first thing that comes to mind is chess by mail. More recently, there's *Words with Friends.* But more generally, kids and adults are spending more

of their play time on Zoom or other video chat services to connect with their friends when they cannot be in the same room.

Borman: Since the advent of long-distance communication, networking has played an important role in video games. Games first designed for mainframe computers, such as *Spacewar! (1962)* and *Star Trek (1971)* spread through networked computers, with players making modifications, adding more complex features to the games. Online text-based adventure games called MUDs, or Multi-User Dungeons, have existed since the 1970s, where players would read descriptions of rooms and chat with others. As both the computers being used and the networking technologies improved, game developers began pushing the technology further. First released in 1986 by Lucasfilm Games, *Habitat* was one of the first massively multiplayer online role-playing games that had graphical elements, unlike the earlier MUDs. While online access was still limited at that point, those early games would heavily influence games that would come later. Many gamers still play MUDs to this day.

As the Internet became more available in the 1990s, more games added online functionality. First-person shooter games such as *DOOM* (1993) and *Quake* (1996), along with new massively multiplayer games like *Everquest* (1999) would connect millions of people throughout the world. Friendships formed that were not limited to where a person lived or even the language that they spoke.

Even the arcade, which thrived for decades on players being close to one another, started to explore online games, with companies like Midway adding online functionality to games like *San Francisco Rush 2049 Tournament Edition* in 2000. Although arcades decreased in popularity in many parts of the world, many new arcade titles in Japan offer some form of online connectivity, allowing players to carry their progress and compete with other players regardless of their physical location, sometimes even connecting to home versions.

The rise of the Internet also shifted many local or physical competitions online. Some, like Twin Galaxies, which coordinated many onsite video game competitions, continued to focus primarily on high scores that could now be charted and shared online. Other competitions more closely resembled traditional sports, with esports organizations developing tournaments for almost all genres of games. With the rise of online streaming, the Internet has become the place spectators go to watch it all.

Socially distant game play is not new for the video games. While COVID-19 has forced players to remain physically apart, it has provided a bridge for social communication for many. In fact, in March 2020, some influential video game companies and organizations joined forces to promote the Playing Apart Together campaign to encourage players to follow pandemic safety guidelines.

AJP: Museums often dispatch their curators to do rapid response collecting during extraordinary events. What has The Strong done to collect artifacts and other materials to help document how people played during this period?

Bensch: I was most involved with the museum's "Play Stories" project we launched in spring 2020 to solicit and collect personal videos talking about the ways people were playing within the limitations of the time, especially during lockdown. It was great to gather this firsthand documentation of play in real time rather than filtered by people's memories after the fact.

Ricketts: A colleague at the museum also photographed family responses to the lockdown in her neighborhood. She offered these as digital assets to the museum, and so we collected images of sidewalk and driveway chalk drawings, hopeful and grateful signs on homes, and socially distant events such as birthday parades and school bus drive-by celebrations. The images include family pod craft activities and celebrations, as well. Families in lockdown also make their own games, structuring play at a time when they might otherwise play in a social environment. These are harder to collect, but we have acquired a few.

Borman: On the digital games side, our first focus has been on the games themselves, ensuring that we have playable copies of some of the more popular games. But we recognize that to truly capture what has happened, we need to go beyond the games themselves. We have reached out to various streamers to attempt to capture some of the game play and community conversations that occurred during these games, as these will provide context beyond what the game could ever do.

Public documentation, like sales figures, are only beginning to be released but will be extremely important to help us better understand what games people played. We have also looked at other artifacts more directly related to the pandemic. Masks with video game themes, such as one that lists stats on it as a role-playing game might, show how many players have taken something they love and applied it to a difficult situation.

As many developers and players have spent additional time organizing

at home, some have reached out to us with potential donations. So, the pandemic itself has provided new opportunities to preserve important materials.

AJP: What are some of the challenges with this kind of collecting and curating?

Bensch: We can never avoid the kinds of demographic skewing that happens when a project requires that participants have time and technology to accomplish the task—let alone the subset of the population who feels motivated to participate and willing to share. We need to stay humble that we are gathering a sample but not a representative one.

AJP: If you had to choose one favorite object to represent play during this time, what would it be?

Parnett: Former teen model Tonya Ruiz's Barbie—she styled a Barbie that looked like her in quarantine. The parody included a crossword puzzle, cards, snacks, and whiskey in a teacup. As the months of quarantine continued, she produced Quarreling Couple, Bread Baking, Home Salon, and Zoom Ken, among others. This is such a creative way to deal with fear, grief, and adversity.

Bensch: As a cook, I am also a fan of Ruiz's "Bread Baking" Barbie. I am still feeding my sourdough starter almost a year later, so I could relate to this Barbie version. And, remembering the ingredient shortages I've encountered in the past year, it's great to see that the Barbie set reflects stockpiling of things like flour.

Borman: I would choose *Animal Crossing: New Horizons.* Prior to the game's release, many players of previous games in the series were not as excited for the new game. However, when the game released at a time where people were just starting to quarantine, it provided a routine for many to follow during global disruption. It is also a game that can be enjoyed by any kind of player, even those who have never played a video game. It provides opportunities to connect with others in a virtual world when we are all required to remain socially distant. It allowed players to craft their own story about their own previously deserted island. It could not have appeared at a better time.

Ricketts: A hand-drawn scavenger hunt game a colleague made for his two children to play. A simple grid with words and crude pictures of household items. Each child marked off the square when she or he found the item. The game is wonderfully simple and such things are usually discarded. Handmade games themselves are rarities.

AJP: What have you learned from collecting these artifacts? Have any play patterns emerged?

Bensch: With people limited in their home spaces, the power of imaginative play, online play, and the need to create games and play from the materials and environment around us seem even more apparent than before.

AJP: What changes did The Strong make to continue to provide playful experiences during the pandemic?

Bensch: The museum thought a lot about points of physical content and making sure those touchable surfaces were maintained in as hygienic a state as possible. We swapped out hard-to-clean soft toys for ones that were easier to sanitize and put baskets around the building for library books that people had used so that the books didn't go directly back on the shelf. We also were committed to creating exhibit and activity spaces where it would be easy to maintain social distance. We tried to look at everything closely so that parents and other guests did not have to feel they needed to be engaged in constant vigilance about the risks involved in our setting.

AJP: How has The Strong sought to connect with its local, national, and international guests during the pandemic?

Bensch: I have been involved with providing free video content in our Stories about the Stuff series as well as for-fee social events that create a more intimate and interactive environment to share information and engage. We've also created several online exhibits on topics such as board games, educational computer games, ball play, and the trailblazing Black-owned play company Shindana Toys.

AJP: One last question: Are there any objects or materials related to playing during the pandemic that you are still looking for or wish you were able to collect?

Ricketts: If we consider, today, the culture during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, some of the most valuable evidence lies in photographs of the era. How did people fare with face masks then? What did they know about the virus and contagion? Photographs tell much of that story. I would be glad to get more images, stories, and artifacts of individual and family play during the 2020 pandemic.

Borman: We can certainly look to media reports to begin to understand the impact of the pandemic, but any internal game industry documentation would be extremely valuable to help shed light on the struggles and successes during this rapidly changing situation. I am also interested in explor-

ing the surge of nongamers buying hardware that was primarily designed for gaming and game streaming, such as many of the lighting solutions and webcams that have been popular, along with general PC hardware.

Parnett: Margaret Woodbury Strong, the museum's founder, was especially fond of miniatures. As a child, she traveled the world with her parents. As an adult she recalled, "I was allowed to carry a small bag to put my dolls and toys in, and to add anything I acquired on the trips. Consequently, my fondness for small objects grew." So, in the spirit of Margaret, I think it would be wonderful, and beneficial to our collections, to add a dollhouse done by a hobbyist during the pandemic.