“Playing on the Ruins: Children, War, and the Reclamation of Space”

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Abstract

This paper examines how children's play reveals the relationship between childhood and environments shaped by conflict. Drawing on reflective practice, lived experience, and interdisciplinary scholarship in childhood studies, play theory, and conflict research, it develops a conceptual analysis of conflict-themed play across contexts, ranging from mediated cultural representation to direct experience of violence.

The paper introduces the concept of *reclamatory play* as a conceptual contribution to play theory: a process through which children symbolically engage with and rework the material and social conditions they inherit. Through narrative reflection and practitioner insight, it traces how children transform objects, spaces, and narratives associated with conflict into sites of movement, exploration, and interaction.

It argues that this engagement constitutes a distinct mode of meaning-making, conceptualised here as reclamatory play. In doing so, it challenges assumptions that separate childhood from wider social and political realities and highlights the ethical implications of the conditions within which children are required to live.

Introduction

There are some subjects that do not arrive as finished thoughts. They do not present themselves as clearly bounded problems or defined areas of study. Instead, they emerge gradually, often in fragments: a memory that persists without clear explanation, or an image that carries more weight than it first appears to hold.

These fragments remain unsettled. They return over time, asking to be reconsidered, reinterpreted, and placed into relation with other experiences. This paper began in that way.

It did not originate as a formal research project concerned with children and war, nor as a purely theoretical exploration of play. Rather, it developed through a series of encounters—personal, professional, and observational—that, over time, began to form a pattern that could not easily be ignored. What initially appeared as disconnected moments gradually revealed a coherence, not because they were identical, but because they shared a structural similarity in how children engaged with the worlds they inhabited.

The earliest of these encounters belong to childhood.

I think first of the streets of my childhood in Stoke-on-Trent a declining industrial city in the UK—not as background or setting, but as active, lived terrain. These were open, shared spaces, animated by movement. Children gathered without formal arrangement. The boundaries between home and the outside world were porous rather than fixed, allowing for a fluid movement between domestic and communal space. Within this environment, play was not a separate or designated activity. It was embedded within the rhythms of everyday life. It occupied the gaps left unstructured by adults and, in doing so, became one of the primary ways in which we encountered and made sense of the world.

These were not neutral spaces. Although they felt open and unbounded, they were already shaped by broader social, cultural, and economic conditions. The council estates of 1970s Britain were products of post-war reconstruction, class structure, and shifting patterns of labour and community. Yet as children, we did not experience these forces abstractly. We

encountered them materially—through the spaces available to us, the freedoms we experienced, and the cultural narratives that circulated around us.

It was within this context that many of us first began to engage with a world we did not yet fully understand. We played games we had not invented.

The games we played were not created spontaneously from within childhood. They were drawn from elsewhere, arriving through cultural transmission—from television, from film, and from documentary media. War formed a significant part of this symbolic material. Alongside fictionalised war films and westerns, documentary series such as *The World at War*, broadcast by the BBC, and later the work of journalists such as John Pilger, brought images of conflict into the home with a different kind of authority. These were not framed as stories alone, but as accounts of real events—of destruction, displacement, and political violence.

As children, however, we did not encounter these materials critically. The distinction between fiction and documentary was less important than the forms they provided. Across these different representations, certain elements recurred: movement, danger, pursuit, uniforms, weapons, ruins, and resolution. These elements entered the imagination not as fully understood narratives, but as patterns of action that could be translated into play.

What is significant is not simply that children were exposed to representations of war, but that these representations were carried into the spaces of childhood and enacted. War was encountered first not as a moral or political problem, but as structure—something that could be performed, repeated, and inhabited through play.

It was not experienced as unusual or problematic. It was simply part of the fabric of childhood. However, memory does not remain static. As understanding develops, the meaning of past experiences begins to shift. What once appeared unremarkable becomes the site of new questions.

Over time, these childhood memories began to sit alongside other images encountered later in life—images of children in conflict-affected regions moving through landscapes marked by destruction. Children climbing on the remains of tanks, navigating damaged environments, and interacting with the material residues of war as if they were part of the ordinary terrain of childhood. These were not scenes from my own childhood, and yet they were not entirely unfamiliar. They carried a form of recognition. It is important to be clear about what this recognition is not. This should not be read as a claim of equivalence.

The experiences of children growing up in conditions of relative safety cannot be compared to those of children living amid active conflict, displacement, or sustained violence. The scale of harm, risk, and loss differs profoundly. Any attempt to collapse these differences would be ethically and analytically problematic.

And yet, despite these differences, a connection remains. This connection lies not in the conditions themselves, but in the way, children engage with those conditions—a distinction central to this paper’s argument.

Reclamatory Play: A Conceptual Framework

Children do not wait for the world to become stable, coherent, or morally ordered before they begin the work of living. They do not suspend play until conditions are appropriate. Instead,

they work with what is available. They engage with the environments they inherit, regardless of whether those environments are shaped by care, neglect, or violence.

This paper seeks to reframe how such play is understood within both academic and practice contexts, moving beyond interpretations that reduce it to imitation or dysfunction. Specifically, it examines how children use play to encounter, interpret, and rework the material and symbolic remnants of conflict. It asks what this reveals about the nature of play, the relationship between childhood and the wider social world, and the ethical conditions under which children are required to live.

The central claim advanced here is that children's play—particularly when it engages with themes, symbols, or environments associated with conflict—should not be understood simply as imitation, pathology, or behavioural deviation. Instead, such play can be understood as a form of reclamatory play.

The term reclamatory play is used here to describe a process through which children reappropriate and reinhabit the material and symbolic conditions they inherit—particularly those shaped by conflict. It emphasises transformation through use, rather than replication or resolution. A destroyed structure becomes a place to climb; a weapon becomes an object of gesture; a landscape marked by conflict becomes a terrain for movement and interaction. Reclamatory play does not resolve the realities from which it emerges, nor does it neutralise their meaning. The histories embedded within these materials remain. However, it introduces a parallel register of use—one in which the products of adult action are rendered, however briefly, usable within the context of childhood. This process is enacted through the body, through movement, and through relational interaction with others, rather than through conscious reflection alone.

Positioned in this way, reclamatory play can be distinguished from more limited interpretations of conflict-themed play. It is not reducible to imitation, as it involves transformation rather than replication. It is also inadequately explained by models of catharsis or the discharge of aggression, and cannot be fully contained within trauma-processing frameworks.

Instead, it is better understood as a mode of engagement: a way in which children encounter the conditions of their world and, within the constraints of those conditions, create forms of temporary inhabitation.

To recognise reclamatory play is not to celebrate it as resilience, nor to interpret it as evidence of adaptation alone. It is to acknowledge the extent to which children are required to work with environments they did not create. What appears, on the surface, as ordinary play begins to reveal itself as an ongoing negotiation with the material and symbolic consequences of adult decisions.

Through play, children take the hard surfaces of violence—the objects, structures, and residues produced by conflict—and render them usable. They climb, collect, transform, and inhabit what has been left behind. In doing so, they do not resolve the realities of war, but they demonstrate how human life persists in its aftermath.

This is not an argument for resilience as a form of redemption, nor an attempt to locate hope within devastation. It is an insistence that we attend carefully to what children are doing, and to what their actions reveal about the worlds they have been given.
This engagement is historical or reflective. It continues within my current practice as Strategic Director of Sporting Communities CIC, where our work increasingly brings us into

contact with children and families who have fled conflict and are seeking refuge within the United Kingdom. Through this work, often in partnership with organisations such as ASHA North Staffordshire, we encounter children whose relationships to conflict are not mediated primarily through representation, but through lived experience.

Within these contexts, the dynamics explored in this paper take on a different weight. Play does not disappear in the presence of displacement, uncertainty, or trauma. It persists. Children continue to move, explore, and engage with the environments available to them, often in ways that echo, complicate, and extend the forms of play described earlier. These contemporary encounters do not replace the earlier reflections that shape this paper. Rather, they affirm and deepen them, situating reclamatory play not only as a conceptual lens, but as an observable and ongoing practice within present-day community work.

At its core, this is a paper about attention.

Methodological Approach

Methodologically, this paper can be understood as a form of reflexive, practice-based inquiry informed by elements of autoethnographic and interpretive qualitative traditions. It draws on lived experience, long-term practitioner engagement, and observational insight, not as anecdotal illustration but as a site of knowledge production.

The approach is deliberately integrative, combining narrative reflection with conceptual analysis to explore patterns of meaning that emerge across different contexts. While it does not claim generalisability in a conventional empirical sense, it seeks to offer theoretical insight grounded in sustained engagement with practice.

Playing at War: Early Symbolic Worlds

Like many children growing up in Britain during the 1970s, I encountered representations of war long before I had any capacity to understand their historical, political, or ethical dimensions. The television landscape was limited in comparison to today, but its influence was concentrated. A small number of channels meant repeated exposure to particular forms of content, embedding them within the rhythms of everyday domestic life.

These representations were not experienced as isolated events. They formed part of the background texture of childhood. Fictional war films, westerns, news footage, and documentary series coexisted within the same viewing environment. For adults, these materials may have carried distinct meanings—entertainment, historical reflection, or political critique. For children, however, they operated differently. They provided patterns.

Alongside fictionalised narratives, documentary programming played a significant role in shaping this landscape. Series such as The World at War, broadcast by the BBC, and later the work of journalists such as John Pilger, brought images of conflict into the home with a particular claim to reality. These were not framed as stories in the conventional sense, but as records of events—accounts of destruction, displacement, and political violence.

Yet for the child viewer, the distinction between fiction and documentary was not always clearly held. What mattered was not genre, but form. Across these different media, certain elements recurred: movement, danger, pursuit, uniforms, weapons, ruins, and resolution.

These elements did not remain confined to the screen. They were carried into play. The authority of documentary representation did not prevent these images from becoming playable; rather, it intensified their presence without yet providing the interpretive tools required to fully understand them.

The concept of the "script" is useful here. Children did not simply imitate what they saw in a literal sense. Rather, they internalised patterns of action and relation—attacker and defender, advance and retreat, victory and defeat—and re-enacted them within the environments available to them. This process was largely pre-reflective. It operated through the body rather than through conscious analysis.

We did not watch these materials critically. We absorbed them affectively. Gesture, rhythm, and emotional tone entered our play before meaning was fully understood. War was not initially encountered as a site of suffering or moral complexity. It appeared as structured action—dynamic, organised, and capable of being performed.

The physical environments in which we played enabled this translation from representation to enactment. Council estates, alleyways, open ground, and industrial wastelands of the coal mines (pits) and potteries provided flexible and often unsupervised terrain. These spaces were not designed for play, yet they were readily appropriated. Objects within them were reinterpreted according to the logic of the scripts we had absorbed: a stick became a rifle, a wall became cover, a boundary became a frontline.

This process often felt like freedom. And in many respects, it was. Movement was expansive, and play was self-directed. Yet this sense of autonomy coexisted with a high degree of structural influence. The narratives available to us were culturally produced, and the roles within those narratives were limited. Particular forms of masculinity—associated with endurance, control, and dominance—were implicitly reinforced, while alternative ways of being remained less visible.

This reveals a tension at the heart of play. Play is often understood as a space of creativity and independence. And it is. But it is also shaped by the symbolic and material conditions within which it occurs. Children do not create in isolation. They create within environments already structured by history, culture, and power.

In retrospect, another layer becomes visible. Growing up within a family and a community shaped by the legacy of the Second World War, the presence of conflict was not confined to television. It existed in fragments—in silences, in partial stories, in tonal shifts that suggested histories not fully spoken. What was not recognised at the time was how these unarticulated experiences might intersect with the play unfolding outside.

This raises a relational dimension that is often overlooked. Play is not only experienced by those who participate in it. It is also observed, interpreted, and felt by others. For children, war play may be experienced as excitement, competition, and social connection. For adults—particularly those with lived experience of conflict—it may evoke memory, discomfort, or loss.

The same act, therefore, carries multiple meanings.

This does not invalidate the play. But it complicates it. It situates play within a network of relationships and histories, where meaning is neither fixed nor singular. What appears, on the surface, as simple imitation begins to reveal itself as something more structured and more

ambiguous: an early form of engagement with a world already shaped by conflict, before that world can be fully understood.

Art, Symbol, and Recognition

The questions that began to emerge through reflection on childhood did not remain confined to memory. They resurfaced, more insistently, within my later creative practice and studies. I found myself drawn toward militaristic imagery—not because of any attraction to its aesthetic, but because of a growing unease about its persistence. War, as image and symbol, seemed to recur with a particular force, even within contexts that sought to critique it.

This raised a problem. How does one represent something critically when the act of representation risks reproducing its symbolic power?

This question took material form in a sculptural installation: a life-sized, tank-like structure placed in a university courtyard. The intention was explicitly anti-war. The work sought to interrupt the everyday, to make visible the presence of militaristic forms within public space, and to provoke reflection rather than passive recognition.

What it produced, however, was not reflection in the way I had anticipated. The piece was widely misunderstood. It was read not as critique, but as imposition—something awkward, intrusive, even unwelcome. The response from the local press was dismissive, framing the work as unsuccessful or misplaced.

At one level, this response could be read simply as a failure of communication. But what proved more significant was not the critical reception, but a particular image that emerged in its aftermath.

A photograph showed children climbing on the sculpture. They moved across it with ease—testing its surfaces, navigating its structure, engaging with it as they would any large, climbable object. Their interaction was not mediated by the intended meaning of the work. It was immediate, physical, and exploratory.

The accompanying caption dismissed the sculpture. But the image revealed something more important. It showed children playing on a tank. In that moment, a connection became visible—one that extended beyond the specific context of the artwork. I had seen similar scenes before, not in galleries or public art spaces, but in photographs from conflict zones. Children climbing on the remains of military vehicles. Children moving across the debris of war as if it were part of the ordinary landscape of childhood.

The comparison is not one of equivalence. The conditions in which these images occur are profoundly different. Yet the act itself—the way in which children engage with the object—shares a structural similarity. In both cases, an artefact of war becomes an object of play. This transformation is not incidental. It reveals something fundamental about the way children encounter the material world.

A tank, for a child, is not only a weapon. It is also a form—something with height, surface, texture, and potential for movement. It invites interaction. It presents a challenge. It becomes something to climb, to explore, to test. Through this engagement, the meaning of the object begins to shift. What was designed for domination is reconfigured as part of play. What was intended to control or destroy becomes, temporarily, something that can be used, inhabited, and shared.

This does not erase the object's history. Nor does it neutralise its function. But it introduces a second layer of meaning—one that exists alongside the first. It is within this layered meaning that something important becomes visible.

Children do not approach objects first through their intended purpose or moral significance. They approach them through use. Through the body. Through interaction. And in that interaction, they reveal the extent to which the material products of adult action are not fixed in meaning, but open to reinterpretation.

This is where the unsettling dimension of this work becomes most apparent. Children, through play, often soften—though never resolve—the visible failures of adult society. They render usable what has been made destructive. They inhabit what has been made uninhabitable. They do not do this as a form of conscious critique. But the effect is nonetheless revealing.

War Play Across Contexts

The recognition that emerged through both memory and artistic practice was further developed through long-term engagement in community and playwork settings. Over time, it became clear that war play was not confined to particular historical moments or cultural contexts. It appeared repeatedly, though not always in identical forms.

It persisted. Sometimes, it appeared in ways that were directly familiar—children re-enacting scenarios drawn from film, television, or digital media. These forms of play were often stylised, drawing on widely circulating narratives of conflict that had been mediated through cultural representation.

At other times, the context shifted significantly. War play emerged within environments shaped by deprivation, social tension, or proximity to violence. In such contexts, the material being engaged with through play was not only symbolic but grounded in lived experience. This variation complicates any attempt to define war play as a singular phenomenon. It exists across a continuum.

At one end, it is mediated, shaped primarily by representation and imagination. At the other, it is rooted in direct or indirect experience of conflict. Between these poles lies a wide range of hybrid forms, in which elements of both representation and experience are present.

What remains consistent across this range is not the content of the play, but its function. Children use play to engage with the conditions of their world.

This insight aligns with, but also extends, existing understandings within playwork and childhood studies. Play is widely recognised as a space of exploration, experimentation, and development (Else, 2009). However, conflict-themed play often sits uneasily within these frameworks. It disrupts assumptions about innocence and challenges the idea that childhood should be protected from exposure to violence (Jenks, 2005).

The discomfort that adults experience in response to war play is therefore significant. It reflects a tension between two competing ideas of childhood: a protected, separate domain, and one embedded within the realities of the social world

The persistence of war play suggests that the latter cannot be ignored. Children are not external to the conditions in which they live. They are shaped by them, and they respond to them. Play is one of the primary ways in which this response occurs.

As Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) suggests, play is not easily reducible to a single function. It is ambiguous, multi-layered, and resistant to definitive interpretation. This ambiguity is particularly evident in war play, where actions that appear aggressive or problematic may simultaneously contain elements of exploration, social negotiation, and meaning making.

To dismiss such play outright is therefore to risk misrecognising its significance. War play is not necessarily a sign of dysfunction. Nor is it inherently benign. It is, rather, an expression—one that requires careful attention if it is to be understood.

Children Living Within War

If war enters some childhoods through representation, it enters others as an organising condition of daily life. For children living in conflict-affected environments, war is not a distant or symbolic phenomenon. It shapes the material and temporal structure of everyday existence. It is present in the built environment, in patterns of movement, in sound, and in the rhythms of fear and uncertainty that accompany instability.

And yet, within these conditions, play persists. Children play in streets marked by damage, in buildings that bear the traces of violence, and in landscapes where the distinction between ordinary space and sites of conflict has become blurred. They engage with objects that, to outside observers, are saturated with meaning—remains of military vehicles, fragments of infrastructure, debris left behind.

These images are difficult to interpret. They challenge deeply held assumptions about what childhood should be. They appear to disrupt the idea that play belongs to safe, contained environments, separate from the realities of violence. But this interpretation rests on a particular conception of childhood—one that assumes separation from the social and political conditions of the wider world. The persistence of play within conflict contexts challenges this assumption.

Play does not require ideal conditions in order to exist. It emerges within the conditions that are available. This does not make those conditions acceptable. It highlights the adaptability of children's engagement with them. When a child climbs on the remains of a tank, several processes are occurring simultaneously. There is physical exploration, certainly. There is also curiosity, risk-taking, and social interaction. But there is, in addition, a symbolic reconfiguration.

The object is no longer only what it was designed to be. It becomes something else—something that can be used within the context of play. Research within conflict-affected settings suggests that play can support a range of functions, including the processing of experience, the maintenance of social relationships, and the creation of moments of agency within constrained environments (Boyden and de Berry, 2004; Hart, 2002).

However, it is important not to reduce play to function alone. Play is not only a tool for coping. It is also a mode of engagement—one that allows children to position themselves in relation to the conditions they encounter. This positioning is not passive.

Children do not simply absorb their environments. They act within them. They interpret, transform, and respond. To recognise this is not to deny the impact of conflict on children's lives. It is to resist reducing them to that impact alone.

The Inner Work of War Play

To understand war play more fully, it is necessary to move beyond surface description and consider the processes that may be operating beneath it. Play is not transparent. Its meanings are not immediately accessible, nor are they singular. Instead, play operates across multiple registers—emotional, social, symbolic, and bodily. One framework through which this complexity can be approached is that of repetition.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, repetition has been understood as a way of returning to experiences that have not yet been fully integrated (Freud, 1920). In the context of childhood trauma, repetitive play may reflect attempts to gain some form of mastery over overwhelming events (Terr, 1991).

However, this perspective, while useful, is limited if applied too broadly. Not all repetition is a sign of distress. Children repeat actions for a variety of reasons: because they are engaging, because they are enjoyable, or because they are still being explored. War play often involves repetition, but this repetition cannot be assumed to have a single meaning. It may reflect fascination as much as fear. In addition to repetition, war play is structured through relationships.

Children negotiate roles, positions, and hierarchies within play. These roles are not fixed. A child may move between positions—aggressor, defender, observer—within a single play sequence. This movement suggests flexibility rather than rigidity. It also indicates that play is not simply the enactment of a script, but the ongoing negotiation of meaning. The ambiguity of play is central here. As Sutton-Smith (1997) argues, play holds contradictions. It allows for multiple interpretations to coexist.

This ambiguity is not a problem to be resolved. It is a feature of play itself. In practice, this can be observed in the rapid shifts that occur within play. A scenario that begins as conflict may transform into cooperation. A moment of tension may give way to humour. These shifts suggest that play is not a fixed representation, but a dynamic process.

War play, then, can be understood as a form of engagement in which children bring elements of their world into a space where those elements can be reworked. It does not provide resolution. But it may provide a form through which experience can be engaged.

Implications for Practice

In practice, these dynamics are often most visible in spaces where different experiences of the world intersect. Drawing on work with young people in areas of urban deprivation—where newly arrived communities from regions affected by conflict have settled alongside established local populations—a similar pattern of play emerges under altered conditions.

During a residential outward-bound experience, a group of young people—some born and raised within the local urban environment, others with more recent histories shaped by

displacement and conflict—were introduced to open, wooded terrain beyond the structure of their everyday surroundings. Removed from the density and constraint of the urban environment, their play began to reorganise itself almost immediately.

Without direction, the group developed games structured around pursuit: chasing, hiding, tracking, and evasion. Roles shifted fluidly between participants. Some moved into positions of pursuit, others into concealment, using the landscape to navigate visibility and distance. The terrain itself became integral to the play. Trees provided cover, changes in ground offered advantage, and the spatial openness allowed for forms of movement not available in their everyday environments.

What was notable was not simply the emergence of these behaviours, but their shared accessibility across the group. Despite differences in background and experience, the structure of the play required no translation. The act of chasing and being chased, of positioning oneself in relation to others within space, appeared as an immediately recognisable and embodied form of engagement.

For some, these dynamics may have resonated differently, shaped by experiences that extended beyond mediated representations of conflict. However, the play itself did not fix these differences. Instead, it created a shared field of interaction—one in which movement, risk, and relation took precedence over narrative explanation.

In this sense, the excursion did not remove young people from the dynamics explored in this paper but revealed them in a different register—one in which the impulse to pursue, evade, and inhabit space operates prior to, and alongside, the specific histories that shape individual experience. The recognition of war play as meaningful engagement rather than simple behaviour has significant implications for practice.

For practitioners working with children, conflict-themed play often produces immediate concern. It can appear aggressive, unsettling, or inappropriate. The instinct to intervene—to stop or redirect the play—is therefore understandable. This concern is further complicated by children's culture, including the widespread availability of toy guns, which shapes how conflict is introduced and interpreted within play.

In some situations, intervention is necessary. Issues of safety, exclusion, or distress must always be addressed. However, intervention based solely on surface interpretation risks missing the processes taking place within the play.

The first requirement is attention. Attention involves more than observation. It requires a willingness to engage with the complexity of what is occurring. How are children entering the play? How are roles established and negotiated? Does the play remain fixed, or does it evolve? What emotional tones are present?

These questions shift the practitioner's role. From controlling behaviour to interpreting meaning. This shift is consistent with playwork approaches that emphasise low intervention and high awareness (Hughes, 2001). It does not imply passivity, but rather a form of engagement that is responsive rather than reactive.

The environment is also crucial. Spaces that allow for flexibility—through the provision of open-ended materials and adaptable structures—enable children to move between meanings. This flexibility reduces the likelihood of play becoming rigid or repetitive in unproductive ways (Nicholson, 1971).

Finally, practitioner reflexivity is essential. Adults bring their own assumptions, experiences, and emotional responses into encounters with children's play. War play may provoke discomfort not only because of its content, but because it challenges deeply held beliefs about childhood. To engage effectively with such play requires an awareness of these responses.

It requires practitioners to ask not only what children are doing, but how their own interpretations are being shaped.

Conclusion

There is a tendency, when writing about children and war, to seek a conclusion that provides resolution—a way of stabilising what has been revealed. Yet the material considered here resists such closure. Children do not create the structures of war. They do not design the systems, produce the weapons, or determine the conditions into which they are born. Yet they are required to live within the consequences of these actions.

And still, they play.

This paper has argued that such play should not be understood as peripheral or insignificant. It is a form of engagement—one through which children encounter, interpret, and rework the conditions of their lives.

Through play, children do not resolve the realities of conflict. But they do divulge something essential. They reveal how life persists within damaged environments. They demonstrate how meaning is made under constraint and they expose the extent to which the worlds children inhabit are shaped by decisions made long before they have any capacity to influence them.

This is not a comforting insight. It is an ethical one. It calls attention not only to children's capacity for adaptation, but to the conditions that make such adaptation necessary. The question that remains is not what children are doing. It is what their play unravels about the world we have given them.

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