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## Bluey And Adult Fandom: The Importance Of Play In Culture

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“Bluey And Adult Fandom: The Importance Of Play In Culture”

A Thesis by

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## ABSTRACT

“Bluey And Adult Fandom: The Importance Of Play In Culture”

by Olivia Gerzabek

This thesis explores the animated children’s show *Bluey*(2018 -), its ever-growing appeal to millennials, and the online fandom that these millennials have formed. The thesis outlines a brief history of media aimed at children and families, starting with the children’s matinees of the 1930s to children’s educational media of the 1960s through the 2000s with shows like *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999 -) and *Shrek* (2001) appealing to a broad audience of all ages. Compounding on the history of animation and family-centered media, the advent of social media allows users to revisit media they have nostalgia for, share with others, and create a community of fans known as a fandom. The concept of fandom is expanded upon through the theoretical framework of Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study Of The Play-Element In Culture* to discuss how play positively affects people and how engaging in fandom online is a form of play that many millennials engage in. In conjunction, Thomas Ruggiero’s Uses and Gratifications Theory is utilized to discuss why people use social media, and Henry Jenkins’s work on participatory and remix culture explains how social media is used by those involved with fandom. The theories presented by Ruggiero and Jenkins are the framework for transmedia marketing. This marketing strategy is utilized by shows like *Glee* (2009 - 2015), which targeted millennials through encouraging engagement on social media. This marketing strategy was adopted by the marketing team at Ludi Studios for *Bluey*. These elements explain why millennials would be drawn to a series geared toward young children.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Beginning Of Children's and Family Media	3
Adults At Play	15
The Bluey Fandom On Social Media	22
Conclusion	31
Bibliography	33

## INTRODUCTION

*Bluey (2018 -Present)* is the hit animated children’s show created by Joe Brumm and Ludo Studios in Brisbane, Australia. The show follows Bluey, a six-year-old blue heeler (Australian cattle dog), her younger sister Bingo, her mom Chili, and her dad Bandit as they learn about growing up through play. There are currently three seasons with 151 episodes in total commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), where the show originally premiered. The show has had over 170 million views on ABC (Australia) iView from 2019-2022.<sup>1</sup> It has been distributed internationally in the UK (by the BBC). *Bluey* is the most streamed show on Disney+ in the U.S., with 23 billion minutes viewed.<sup>2</sup>

The show’s intended audience is families with preschool-aged children. However, due to the show’s presence on social media and the prevalence of memes, the show has gained an unexpected audience of adults — specifically younger millennials. According to the web traffic site, Similarweb.com, the official *Bluey* website’s (Bluey.tv) largest demographic of visitors at 28.86% are between the ages 25 - 34. In an article posted to LinkedIn, Joseph Dickerson speculates that the show's popularity with adults is due to the show’s themes, humor, and storytelling.<sup>3</sup> Bill Dubiel of Screen Rant also says the show is popular because of the humor. In addition to the humor, he also added the appeal of a never-ending supply of child-friendly games that encourage creativity, realistic depiction of parenting problems, and comforting messages to

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<sup>1</sup> “Bluey Australian Broadcasting Corporation Annual Report 2019-20.” “Transparency Portal,” n.d., <https://www.transparency.gov.au/annual-reports/australian-broadcasting-corporation/reporting-year/2019-20-9>.

<sup>2</sup> William Quinn, “Streaming Grabs a Record 38.7% of Total TV Usage in July, With Acquired Titles Outpacing New Originals,” Nielsen, February 9, 2024, <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2023/streaming-grabs-a-record-38-7-of-total-tv-usage-in-july-with-acquired-titles-outpacing-new-originals/>.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dickerson, “Why Bluey Is the Best Kids Show Ever (and Great for Adults, Too),” October 25, 2023, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-bluey-best-kids-show-ever-great-adults-too-joseph-dickerson-fjmpf/>.



viewers.<sup>4</sup> In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Laurel Hiatt, a childless 25-year-old in Utah currently working toward her PhD in human genetics, says she became a fan after being served fan edits via TikTok. She kept watching because “It’s nice to engage with something that has a resolution in five minutes, where the conflict is whether or not you’re going to get ice cream and the message is you should care about other people.”<sup>5</sup> There is also criticism among the praise for the series, most of which is about the lack of diversity within the show’s main characters. In an article for ABC Everyday, Beverly Wang voices her critique:

We live in a world where the majority of main characters on children's television are white; where there are more animals than people of colour protagonists populating the pages of children's books. Where are the disabled, queer, poor, gender diverse, dogs of colour, and single-parent dog families in *Bluey's* Brisbane? If they're in the background, let them come forward.<sup>6</sup>

This critique is valid; many episodes enforce a heteronormative way of life. The show also doesn’t feature any plotlines that directly address the unique struggles many children and families of color face if they do not adhere to or fit into the dominant culture’s standards for life. Increased diversity of characters and narratives would increase the positive aspects in the series. Despite this criticism, many adult viewers still tune in to the show. It is my contention that adults watch *Bluey* because it evokes nostalgia, encourages play in adults, and due to the show’s presence on social media, has garnered a space for a fandom-based community. By examining

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Dubiel, “13 Reasons Why Bluey Is so Popular With Adults,” Screen Rant, September 17, 2023, <https://screenrant.com/bluey-popular-adults-reason/>.

<sup>5</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, “The Children’s Show ‘Bluey’ Is a Balm for Stressed, Child-free Adults,” *Washington Post*, February 11, 2023,

<sup>6</sup> Beverley Wang, “I’ve Learnt a Lot from Bluey, but It’s Missing One Thing,” ABC Everyday, April 14, 2021, [https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/can-bluey-show-be-more-representative/100042084?fbclid=IwAR3uYfxr\\_c7oz2ZvX305N7H2UMB-xEItJm\\_JR49SiqsUCGvyHPxhqR7I-f0](https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/can-bluey-show-be-more-representative/100042084?fbclid=IwAR3uYfxr_c7oz2ZvX305N7H2UMB-xEItJm_JR49SiqsUCGvyHPxhqR7I-f0).

the historical adult consumption of children’s entertainment and educational programming through the combined theoretical framework of Thomas Ruggiero’s uses and gratification and Henry Jenkins’ work on participatory culture, this essay argues that millennials who engage with family media and online fandoms do so because of the positive effects of play. My analysis will be done in three sections. As a case study, I will discuss how animation history, children’s matinees, and educational programming merge to evoke nostalgia for millennials who watch family-centered content. The second section will define play and how play manifests in adults resulting from consuming content aimed at children. The third and final section will use the *Bluey* fandom’s activity on social media sites like TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit as examples of adult play through Henry Jenkins’ theory on participatory culture. This thesis positions *Bluey* as a piece of media that encourages millennials to play through social media and presents the idea that adults engage in and benefit from play in unexpected places like social media and children’s animation.

### **The Beginning of Children’s and Family Media**

What is initially understood to be children’s entertainment started in film. In the 1920s, feature-length films were a small portion of a balanced program that included a newsreel, a cartoon short, one or two comedy shorts, an interlude, and the feature presentation.<sup>7</sup> It was not until the 1930s that theaters would begin showing “Kiddie Matinees” which were typically offered on weekends and late afternoons.<sup>8</sup> These schedules primarily targeted family audiences — adults *and* children. As burgeoning censorship power grew, children’s advocates set their sights on theater content. Scholar Richard deCordova writes that this resulted in a desire to

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<sup>7</sup> Richard deCordova, “The Child Audience, the Hays Office, and Saturday Matinees”, in *Looking Past The Screen* ed. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Duke Univ. Press: 2007) 236 - 238

<sup>8</sup> Laura Ivans,, “Saturday Kiddie Matinees in the 20th-Century”, Establishing Shot, IU Blogs, 2017. IU Blogs.

satisfy adult conceptions of childhood innocence.<sup>9</sup> This ideology was backed by The National Board of Censorship and the Hays office.<sup>10</sup> In addition to censorship, the move to distinguish ‘children’s’ and ‘adult’ media was the result of a business and social engineering agenda and not based on audience enjoyment, with exhibitors grossing \$1,620,000 and member companies \$405,000 over three-years.<sup>11</sup>

While animated shorts and cartoons have appeared in movie theaters since the mid-1910s, with Mickey Mouse making his official screen debut in 1928, it was Disney’s *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs (1939)*, the first feature-length animated film that motivated Mrs. William Dick Sporberg, to write in the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America’s (MPPDA) publication, *The Motion Picture and the Family*, that the film “may solve for all time the problem of children’s pictures,” speculating that “the animated cartoon may be the medium which appeals most strongly to the young people of America.”<sup>12</sup> However, Walt Disney himself meant for the film to appeal to audiences of all ages, saying, “We don’t think of grown-ups and we don’t think of children,”<sup>13</sup> when discussing the film’s intended audience. Many other people shared Disney’s perspective, with one theater manager stating, “It appeals to every living person from ages 2 to 102.”<sup>14</sup>

Scholar Timothy R. White has examined critical responses to Disney vs. Warner Brothers animation, from the initial release of the *Silly Symphony* shorts in the 1930s to the 1960s. The beginning of his article postulates that critics and fans of live-action films initially viewed Disney animated shorts as an “art.” In contrast, Warner Brothers shorts were viewed as

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<sup>9</sup> Richard deCordova, “The Child Audience, the Hays Office, and Saturday Matinees”, 234

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 235

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 240

<sup>12</sup> Noel Brown *THE CHILDREN’S FILM.* In *The Children’s Film: Genre, Nation, and Narrative* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 41

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 42

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 41- 42

mere cartoons. That artistic view was confirmed with *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs (1937)* followed by *Fantasia (1940)*, garnering universal respect and praise for Walt Disney and his studio.<sup>15</sup> White's findings show that the Warner Brothers shorts were largely dismissed or condemned by critics when initially released.<sup>16</sup> However, television gave *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* a second life, and when coupled with post-WWII sentiments and a mid-century anti-establishment mindset, the Warner Brothers animated shorts took on an appreciated cynicism.<sup>17</sup> Television would allow those who watched animated shorts in theaters pre-WWII to experience them all over again, this time with a sense of nostalgia. The Oxford Dictionary defines nostalgia as "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations."<sup>18</sup> This sense of nostalgia would become a mainstay and viewing characteristic for adults watching family oriented animation for the next seventy years.

Noel Brown articulates the challenges with characterizing the children's genre in *The Children's Film: Genre, Nation, and Narrative* as one that is singularly aimed at children:

The impossibility of categorizing films based purely on who watches them is further underlined by the fact that many films marketed toward children are viewed widely by adults. Indeed, most commercial films are consciously constructed to appeal equally to parents and guardians, who usually need to accompany younger children to the cinema. For this reason, a large percentage of 'children's films' are more properly termed 'family

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<sup>15</sup> White, Timothy R. "From Disney to Warner Bros.: The Critical Shift." *Film Criticism* 16, no. 3 (1992): 3–16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 5

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>18</sup> "Nostalgia Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced American Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com," n.d., [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/nostalgia#:~:text=noun-,noun,for%20her%20own%20college%20days](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/nostalgia#:~:text=noun-,noun,for%20her%20own%20college%20days).

films’; as we shall see, these two categories overlap considerably.<sup>19</sup>

He notes that creators such as Walt Disney, Robert Radnitz, and Brian Henson have stated that they made films for audiences of all ages. Statements from these creators are integral to separating animation from children’s media because the intent was not to create media for one specific demographic but to create films and shorts that would reach a larger audience.

*Snow White* evidenced the popularity of feature-length animated films in 1939; this popularity would continue throughout cinematic history. A contemporary example popular with millennials is the film *Shrek (2001)*, rated “PG” by the Motion Picture Association of America. The original trailer for the film lets viewers know this film is suitable for young audiences. The color scheme animators use in the film is predominantly earth tones with higher saturation. This color palette gives the film a welcoming, cozy atmosphere. The heightened saturation enhances the fantasy element that was often synonymous with previous children’s films that Disney produced during the 1990s. *Shrek’s* use of music in the trailer also shows the audience that the film suits all ages. First, the score is light and airy. The sound of chimes alludes to the magic and imaginative elements prominent in the film. The film score then fades into “I’m On My Way” by The Proclaimers, subtly telling audiences that the film takes a contemporary and comedic approach to the classic fairytale animated film.

The film uses innuendo and mild language akin to the humor of Warner Brothers animation. Younger audiences may not be clued into these jokes, but many adults may find it funny. The film’s central duo of Shrek and Donkey serve as entry points for the audience. Shrek is the entry point for adults as his point of view at the film’s beginning is cynical and sarcastic. Shrek is the character most likely to make a darker or adult joke.

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<sup>19</sup> Noel Brown “*THE CHILDREN’S FILM.*” 3

Donkey is his foil and the entry point for children. As a character, Donkey is the optimist; his humor is silly, and he is always humming or annoying Shrek in some way, not maliciously, but like that of a child who is yet to be weighed down by life. He also follows Shrek; at no point in the film is Donkey in a position of authority. He also asks questions that would provide exposition and explanation to younger audiences. For example, in the scene where Shrek and Donkey are walking through a field of sunflowers, Donkey asks, "Ok, let me get this straight! We gonna go find the dragon and rescue a princess just so Farquaad will give you back the swamp, which you only don't have, 'cause he filled it full of freaks in the first place. Is that about right?" This scene also explains that ogres are like onions; they have layers. This easy metaphor allows children to understand there is more to a person than what meets the eye. The two characters, combined with the previously mentioned uses of color animation, comedy, and music, allow the film to resonate with audiences of all ages. Now, with the accessibility of home viewing, millennial audiences can revisit the films they viewed as children and understand jokes they may not have noticed when they first saw the film, allowing viewers to enjoy a film at all stages of life. Brown's definition and films like *Shrek* position animated films as entertainment for children and adults as family media and are, therefore, suitable for most ages to enjoy.

As television became the more accessible mode of entertainment in the 1950s and 1960s, the family genre expanded to children-specific content, particularly educational programming. Children's educational programming's target demographic and goals differ from those of family entertainment. Where family entertainment is meant to appeal to all age ranges, shows created for children's educational programming's desired demographic are preschool children, hoping

that the program will help those with less access to traditional educational routes. Robert A. Levin and Laurie Moses Hines document this shift in *Educational Television, Fred Rogers, and the History of Education*, stating, “In the post-World War II period, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) set aside 242 television frequencies for noncommercial educational purposes in 1952.”<sup>20</sup> One of these stations included KUIH from The University of Houston in 1953. This is considered to be the first educational television station. The belief at this time was that “the medium had the potential not only to teach children in the classroom but to provide in-home broadcast alternatives to commercial television and what some saw (even then) as its violence and triviality”<sup>21</sup> One year later, in 1954 Fred Rogers a.k.a Mr. Rogers would appear on his first children’s hour titled “The Children’s Corner.” In 1968, Fred Rogers created *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood (1968 - 2001)*. This program was built around three major themes, as outlined by Levin and Hines. First, Fred Rogers spoke with his audience of children about how to identify and cope with emotional challenges in their lives. Second, he nurtured children’s imagination and taught through a “neighborhood of make-believe” where human and puppet characters acted out interpersonal dilemmas. Third, he introduced children to places in the real world by taking them on personally led field trips with a “how things work” and “how people work” focus, such as a trip to a crayon factory and a musical instrument shop.<sup>22</sup>

*Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was on the air simultaneously as another prolific piece of children’s media, *Sesame Street (1969 - )*. Joan Ganz Cooney created the show in collaboration with Jim Henson and Christopher Cerf. Together, they created the Children’s Television Workshop (CTW) and *Sesame Street*. In the original pitch reel for the show, Cooney states that

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<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Levin, Laurie Moses Hines “Educational Television, Fred Rogers, and the History of Education on JSTOR.” 262, *www.Jstor.Org*, n.d. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3218313>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 265

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 265

their aim was “to teach recognition of the letters of the alphabet, numbers, basic reasoning skills, and a better awareness of themselves and the world around them.”<sup>23</sup> CTW would use the same techniques as commercial television to entice children to watch educational programming, such as fast action, humor, and animated segments.<sup>24</sup> The use of commercial television techniques is noteworthy because it was a way to entice children to learn through familiar formats. *Sesame Street* is an educational program that has been on the air for over fifty years, appealing to and teaching multiple generations their ABCs —programs like *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street* would establish the foundation for children’s educational programming.

*Bluey* is a hybrid of family entertainment and children’s educational programming due to its early childhood content and target demographic of preschool-age children. While the show continues the tradition of animated children’s educational programming like *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, it is not focused on teaching children the alphabet and basic numbers, nor is it a hybrid format; it strictly uses animation as a mode of storytelling. However, many episodes of *Bluey* are focused on children’s emotional intelligence, similar to the content of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. An example of this can be seen in the episode “Copycat” (S1Ep39). In this episode, Bluey and Bandit find a hurt bird and take it to the vet’s office. Unfortunately, the bird doesn’t make it, and to process her complex emotions, Bluey reenacts the events of her day. The theme of this episode is learning how to cope with loss. The series pulls from the styles and formats of animated family-oriented films and shorts. The show is animated with a runtime of about eight minutes, reminiscent of the animated shorts that were part of the programs and children’s matinees of the 1920s and 1930s, like *Silly Symphonies* and *Merrie*

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<sup>23</sup> OldSchool, “Old School Sesame Street Original Sales Pitch Reel,” January 9, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80\\_-782Vza4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80_-782Vza4).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*



*Melodies*. Similar to the film *Shrek*, *Bluey* uses innuendo and jokes that younger viewers are not clued into to appeal to adults who may be watching with younger viewers.

*Bluey*'s contemporary popularity among millennials makes sense given cultural phenomena and national events that shaped America's largest generation having recently surpassed Baby Boomers. The millennial generation contains 75.3 million individuals born between 1981 to 1996.<sup>25</sup> In 2015, the racial breakdown in the U.S. is 56% White, 21% Hispanic, 14% Black, 6% Asian, 3% other (two or more races and Native Americans).<sup>26</sup> At the time of this survey 59% of millennials owned a home with 35% living in poverty.<sup>27</sup> Millennials are still a predominantly White generation however, they are less White than the Baby Boomers at 75% and GenXers at 61.5%.<sup>28</sup> Millennials are also less likely to be homeowners and more likely to live in poverty than previous generations, with 81% of Boomers owning homes in 1980 and 67% of GenXers in 2000.<sup>29</sup> The statistics show that millennials are more diverse and less likely to succeed financially than previous generations. A full demographic assessment of the *Bluey* adult fandom falls outside the scope of this project; however, by examining the demographic breakdown of millennials, critiques against the show for its lack of diversity and reassertion of heteronormative values, and its production origins (Australia, a largely White country), one can extrapolate that a large percentage of *Bluey* millennial fans skews toward a largely White fandom. While cultural products (including entertainment) produced by dominant culture (in this instance, 'whiteness') are often considered 'universal,' this is not enough to explain *Bluey*'s generational fandom.

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<sup>25</sup> 1. "Age Range by Generation," Beresford Research, February 29, 2024, <https://www.beresfordresearch.com/age-range-by-generation/>.

<sup>26</sup> William H. Frey, *The Millennial Generation: A Demographic Bridge to America's Diverse Future*, January 2018, 9

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 9

Millennials are often negatively associated with being coddled and having inflated self confidence resulting from ‘participation trophies’ and ‘helicopter parenting.’ In fact, research reveals that this is a harmful mischaracterization: a study done by Project: Time Off found that, on average, millennials take 16.4 days of vacation, whereas previous generations took 20.3 days. In addition to the decline in vacation days, 34% of millennials said they worked every day of their vacation. Helicopter parenting, a phrase first coined in 1969<sup>30</sup>, which then became widely associated with millennials in 1990, which is an unofficial parenting style that leads to higher dependence than independence.<sup>31</sup> Helicopter parenting’s simultaneous rise in the 1990s with increased usage of telecom technology (e.g., texting and email), would greatly affect the way millennials were raised and how much they would depend on their parents for decision making leading to increased anxiety.<sup>32</sup> But perhaps the most notable anxiety inducing event for millennials was the 9/11 attacks. In an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Benjamin Oreskes states, “That single act of terror helped shape our conception of America’s role in the world and our sense of vulnerability. We barely remember an America that was not at war, or where airplanes were not viewed as potential weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>33</sup> In the same article, Oreskes discussed how millennials are less likely to buy into American exceptionalism with two wars, natural disasters, growing dread about climate change, an economic crisis, and a pandemic.<sup>34</sup> The trauma of 9/11 and the following events make the 1990s a time of peace in the

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<sup>30</sup> Ginott, Haim, G., *Between Parent and Teenager*, the macmillan company, 1969, p. 18

<sup>31</sup> Cline, F. W., & Fay, J. (1990). *Parenting with love and logic: Teaching children responsibility*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon

<sup>32</sup> Katie Bahr, “The Effects of Helicopter Parenting on the Millennial Generation,” Kutztown.edu, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=honorspapers>.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Oreskes, “I Was 8 in New York during 9/11. How Did It Change Me - and My Generation?,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 2021,

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

minds of millennials that were between ages 5 - 10 in that decade. Given the state of economic and societal conditions, this anxiety – and the need to alleviate it – seems warranted.

*Bluey* can evoke nostalgia in millennials growing up in the shadow of 9/11. *Bluey*'s gentle wholesome qualities are reminiscent of family entertainment films such as *Shrek*, and cartoons that were popular on Nickelodeon during the 1990s. In 1995 Nickelodeon showed 15.5 hours of animated programming a day. This programming included the shows *Rugrats* (1991 - 2001), *Rocko's Modern Life*, (1993 - 1996), *Doug* (1991 - 1999), *Aaahh!!! Real Monsters* (1994-1997) and reruns of *Looney Tunes*.<sup>35</sup> The exposure to and enjoyment of animated programs in their childhood makes many millennials primed to be animation fans for life. However, it is the millennial moment that primes this demographic to be particularly receptive to *Bluey* consumption as adults. Due to the constant scrutiny in the media and traumatic world events, millennials exhibit an attraction to gentle media like the content seen in shows like *Bluey*.

*Bluey*'s nostalgic impulses are most apparent through its 2-D animated format, which is reminiscent of the shows, shorts, and animated films many millennials watched as children. The utilizes a soft color palette, which gives it a relaxed, happy feeling. The softness of the color palette makes the show feel like a memory. Further, the show's original musical score, by composer Joff Bush, is composed of various pieces with a playful energy; the songs are bouncy and upbeat. For example, Bush borrows from 80s synth-pop in the track titled "Pool". The woodwind instruments are reminiscent of folk songs in the tracks "The Weekend" and "A Message from the Fairies." when the girls are imaginative or curious. The score and color palette are designed to remind adult viewers of the wonders of childhood.

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<sup>35</sup> Norma Pecora, "Nickelodeon Grows Up: The Economic Evolution of A Network", in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, ed. Heather Hendershot, (NYU Press 2004), 31

The show evokes nostalgia for millennial viewers in other ways. Throughout the show, the Heeler family can be seen playing together on screen. An example of this can be seen in the episode “Tickle Crabs” (S2 Ep20). The episode starts with Bandit and Chili sitting on the couch. Bandit lounges while Chili concentrates on removing gum from a doll’s hair. The first line of dialogue comes from Bandit: “It has been ten minutes since a kid has come in and asked me a question.” Immediately after saying this, Bluey and Bingo run in and ask to play a game called “Tickle Crabs.” The premise of this game is that Bluey and Bingo are crabs mistakenly brought home from the beach by Bandit, and they tickle people. Throughout the episode, there are hints that Bandit does not love the game but is always willing to play with his children. Creating a shared experience with his girls that they will remember fondly as they grow up.

Another example of families creating shared memories together is in the episode “Escape”(S2 Ep21); Bluey and Bingo are being dropped off at their Nana’s house; on the ride over, the two express excitement about being able to watch TV. Bandit says they should use their imagination and draw something instead. Bluey then asks what Bandit and Chili will do while She and Bingo are at Nana’s; when Bandit begins to reply that he and Chili will be enjoying a peaceful afternoon, the animation style changes to a children’s drawing. The girls are upset by the prospect of their parents enjoying time away from them. They then imagine that they are crashing their parents' afternoon. As the hypothetical conversation continues, the parents' plan to escape gets more complicated than the girls' plan to foil their afternoon. The episode is about using the imagination to play with one another even while they are in the car. In addition to the on-screen games played that can be translated to real life, show creator Joe Brumm said in an interview with NPR:

I really just wanted to create a show that parents would enjoy watching with their kids rather than you just sort of tolerate it. Because I thought that that must be a really great experience for a young kid, you know, a 4-year-old, a 5-year-old, to be sitting on a couch laughing together with their parents at their favorite show.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar interview with *The Washington Post*, Brumm shared that even though his storytelling was inspired by watching *The Simpsons* (1989) as a kid, “a story is a story,” so when he was able to create his show, he set out to “tell a good emotional family story using adventurous filmmaking.”<sup>37</sup> Evident throughout, the series' narratives focus on comedic moments while the family plays their many games and uses humor aimed at children *and* adults. In the season three opener titled “Perfect,” Bandit and a neighbor named Fido are seen chatting at a BBQ. Through innuendo, two adult male dogs discuss neutering. Bandit states, “Look, I’m keen to get it done, but Chilli, she wants to keep her options open. But I don’t know. Do we want any more of these things running around?” just as Bingo runs into him. It is a moment that the adults watching would understand.

Another example is in the episode “Daddy Putdown”(S1 Ep51), where the family is outside playing on the swings, and Bandit is slowly winding the swing chains up so the girls spin when released. Bingo asks, “How does the baby get in the lady’s belly?” Bandit looks at the camera, breaking the fourth wall before releasing the swing and sending Bingo spinning so he does not have to answer the question. By targeting adults with mature content. The show can appeal to an audience of all ages. *Bluey’s* callbacks to previous generations of family and children’s education content have captured the minds of millennial viewers through their

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<sup>36</sup> Joe Brumm, interviewed by Erika Ryan, *The Creator of ‘Bluey’ Writes for Both Kids and Grown-ups*, NPR, November 29, 2022

<sup>37</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, “The Children’s Show ‘Bluey’ Is a Balm for Stressed, Child-free Adults,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2023/02/08/bluey-adult-fandom-tiktok/>

nostalgia for the content they watched as children in the 1990s. Watching nostalgic media is not a bad thing or a form of regression. The positive effects of nostalgia and shared experiences are explored in *Looking Back to Move Forward: Nostalgia as a Psychological Resource for Promoting Relationship Goals and Overcoming Relationship Challenges*. Scholars Andrew A. Abeyta and Clay Routledge say that nostalgic memories are predominantly social, where those:

Who reflected on a nostalgic memory reported stronger intentions to pursue goals of connecting with their friends than did participants who reflected on a positive or ordinary memory. Nostalgia increases friendship goal striving relative to a positive memory. However, reflecting on a positive memory increased the positive affect relative to nostalgia.<sup>38</sup>

In short, when adults have positive nostalgia, they are more likely to connect with others and create nostalgic memories. The adults who watch *Bluey* see an animated family learning and playing together, which evokes the positive nostalgia discussed by Abeyta and Routledge. The adults experiencing this are then moved to reach out to loved ones to continue the cycle and create new shared memories and experiences. This manifests as a form of play in adults.

### **ADULTS AT PLAY**

To understand why it is beneficial for adults to engage with family media and play, one needs to understand what play is. In *Young at Heart: A Perspective for Advancing Research on Play in Adulthood*, Meredith Van Meet and Brooke C. Feeney offer a three-part definition of play. "...we define play as an activity or behavior that (a) is carried out with the goal of amusement and fun, (b) involves an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude or approach, and (c)

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<sup>38</sup> 1. Andrew A. Abeyta, Clay Routledge, and Jacob Juhl, "Looking Back to Move Forward: Nostalgia as a Psychological Resource for Promoting Relationship Goals and Overcoming Relationship Challenges.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 109, no. 6 (December 2015): 1034, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000036>.

is highly interactive among play partners or with the activity.”<sup>39</sup> Dr. Stuart Brown of the National Institute of Play offers another definition in his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*: “Play is a state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time. And play is self-motivated, so you want to do it again and again.”<sup>40</sup> Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study Of The Play-Element In Culture* explains. “...play is based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain ‘imagination’ of reality (i.e., its conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their ‘imagination.’ We shall observe their action in play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life.”<sup>41</sup> Huzinga’s book's central theme is that “all is play”<sup>42</sup>. Play can be manifested through sports, war, and art. From these definitions, play can be defined as an activity that leads to a state of enjoyment. Play is not passive; it actively engages the mind and imagination. Play is different from a leisurely activity that is passive.

Meredith Van Meet and Brooke C. Feeney suggest that adults use play differently than children. Most of their study is done on the social aspect of adult play. Their findings are that in the short term, play with others can produce feelings of acceptance and positive emotions. Play can manifest through board games, joking, or social interaction through book clubs and other community-based activities. Brown notes, however, that adults struggle to reach a state of play. If an activity becomes tedious or frustrating, it can no longer be considered play.<sup>43</sup>

*Bluey* has multiple episodes that mirror adults' struggles in finding a state of play,

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<sup>39</sup>1. Meredith Van Vleet and Brooke C. Feeney, “Young at Heart,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 5 (September 2015): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615596789>.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (Penguin Random House, 2009), 60

<sup>41</sup> Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 4

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 212

<sup>43</sup> “National Institute For Play - ‘Why We Play.’” *Nifplay.Org*, [www.nifplay.org/what-is-play/biological-drive-to-play/](http://www.nifplay.org/what-is-play/biological-drive-to-play/)

navigating strained interpersonal relationships, and living in the moment. These issues are poignantly addressed in episodes like “Born Yesterday” (S3 Ep6). In this episode, a game with Bluey and Bingo, Bandit pretends that he was born yesterday and knows nothing about the world, highlighting the challenges adults face in maintaining a playful mindset and the potential impact on their relationships and emotional well-being. The three of them go for a walk around the neighborhood while the girls explain what simple things are, like cars, birds, and the sun. As the game continues, the things the girls have to explain become more complicated, and with Bandit always committed to the game, it begins to cause trouble for the girls. Bluey and Bingo eventually decide that explaining everything to their father is too complicated, so they take him back into their backyard. Here, Bandit spots a leaf on the ground and asks what it is. The girls tell him it does not matter and he should just look. At this moment, the animation style changes. There is an extreme closeup of the animated leaf where the viewer can see the veins on it and more shading, with specs of dust and sunlight floating around the screen. The show's score plays in the background and enhances the emotional feeling of stopping and looking. The episode is about slowing down and admiring the simple things in life, even when there are more complicated things to know and worry about.

Similar episodes include “Relax” (S3 Ep 40), where the Heeler family is on a beach vacation. Throughout the episode, Chili keeps repeating, "Let's hurry up and do this so we can relax." While Chili is intent on getting to the beach, the girls are having fun exploring the place they are renting for vacation; this annoys Chili. Bandit tells her to go down to the beach while he watches the girls so she can have a moment of peace. While sitting on the beach, Chili finds herself anxious and unable to relax. During this sequence, there are cutaways of the girls getting excited about bunk beds and coat hangers. When Chili decides she cannot relax on the beach, she



returns to the rental. When Bandit asks what she's doing back upstairs, she says, "I don't know how to relax; it's harder than it looks." Bandit comforts her and tells her, "I'll tell you what, you want to learn to relax, go and get some tips from the masters." referring to Bluey and Bingo, who are busy launching themselves across the room with the footrest of a recliner chair. As Chili watches the girls laugh and play, she says to herself, "You girls just go about it." Chili inhales deeply, then exhales with a sigh. The background music, which has been riffing on the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts," swells into a complete verse of the song. The scene changes to show the tops of pine trees blowing in the breeze. Then, we see the sky with the distant silhouettes of seagulls. Then, we see the calm ocean with a distant ship. The scene comes back to Chili. She blinks slowly and smiles. She sets her tea down, lays back on a deck chair, and closes her eyes. "Relax" is an episode that narratively and stylistically teaches adults to slow down and take a lesson from the kids as they laugh and play their way through the day. "Relax" has a message that appeals to millennial sensibilities because of the previously mentioned anxiety caused by being overworked in conjunction with traumatic world events that occurred throughout the early lives of millennials.

As Van Meet and Feeney point out, the long-term effects of that play are that positive emotions lead to better performance in problem-solving, satisfaction in relationships, and overall reduced stress.<sup>44</sup> Play can also be a solo activity. Based on definitions established thus far, a solo activity can be considered play if it is done actively and is done to reach a state of enjoyment. Adult play reduces stress, reaffirms positive emotions, and solves relationship problems. Examples of solo adult play can be reading, doing a puzzle, or drawing. Participating in the fandom can be considered play on both a community and solo basis. Creating memes and video

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<sup>44</sup> Meredith Van Vleet, Brooke C. Feeney "Young at Heart: A Perspective for Advancing Research on Play in Adulthood, 640

compilations of humorous moments can be a solo play activity. The act of creating is done by oneself. It becomes social when it is shared with others on social media. It is community-based when participants interact with other fans through social media by commenting on posts or joining in on fan theories and discussions. The desire to share on social media and form a community is related to nostalgia and nostalgic memories. When fans interact, it creates a feeling of acceptance and a positive nostalgic memory, encouraging the poster to continue reaching out to others. As more fans post on social media and interact a social group of fans is formed. These social groups revolving around a piece of media are referred to as a fandom.

Fandom and play are also part of Thomas Ruggiero's Uses and Gratifications Theory. Ruggiero's theory suggests that audience members are active in the media they choose to consume as it satisfies a need within them. These needs can be cognitive, affective, social, and tension-release.<sup>45</sup> Uses and Gratifications overlap with the need for play through the need for social and stress relief. As media consumption and fandom participation are active choices, they meet the criteria that play needs to engage the mind while being a source of amusement. The adults in the *Bluey* fandom are not only reaching a state of play but are also engaging in the uses and gratifications theory. Many fandom activities occur on social media platforms because of their interactive interface. The subsequent user-generated fandom content of social media sites is a form of entertainment that fulfills a need within adults for play. In the case of millennials who participate in fandom on social media, millennials have grown up with social media. In 2003, when Myspace first emerged, many millennials joined as teenagers and young adults. Myspace was the dominant social media platform from 2003 - 2008.<sup>46</sup> During this time, many users found

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas E. Ruggiero, "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century." *Mass Communication and Society* 3, no. 1 (February 2000):15, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0301\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0301_02).

<sup>46</sup> Colleen Harley. 2021. "How Myspace Influenced a Movement: From A Millennials Perspective." The Medium, January 16, 2021, <https://colharley813.medium.com/how-myspace-influenced-a-movement-from-a-millennials-perspective-a-157c284b3f6>

online communities centering on their favorite media pieces, joining various fandoms. Not all millennials participate in fandom; however, in 2019, Gitnux reported that 90.4% of millennials use social media, making them the most active online demographic.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, how the generation communicates, forms communities, and plays has been shaped by social media. Much of the communication and interaction is done online and in fandom spaces through memes.

The recent Elmo vs. Rocco meme is an example of interacting with social media to reach a state of play and communicate with others online. In 2022, a *Sesame Street* clip of an episode from 1999 of Elmo arguing with Zoe's pet rock "Rocco" resurfaced on TikTok.<sup>48</sup> The clip was then memed, edited, and re-edited, with edits slowly zooming in on Elmo's face as he gets more frustrated. Another version of this meme is a supercut of every time the two characters interact. The Elmo vs. Rocco meme merges uses and gratification theory with play in adults. The play aspect of this is in the creation of the meme itself. Fans who post edits or take the viral audio and make their own jokes are engaging in an activity that is fun and, therefore, will reduce stress in themselves and others who view their memes. The likes and comments on social media will validate the poster and make them feel accepted in an online community. The use and gratifications come from choosing to watch the meme and interact with it by sharing it with others on different platforms to create a shared experience of laughing at something online.

*Bluey* is not the first instance of adults enjoying children's media and creating a fandom around it. *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999 -) premiered on Nickelodeon on May 1, 1999. Creator Stephen Hillberg designed the show to appeal to children ages two to eleven. The show,

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<sup>47</sup> 1. Jannik Lindner, "Millennials on Social Media Statistics [Fresh Research] • Gitnux," GITNUX, December 23, 2023, <https://gitnux.org/millennials-on-social-media-statistics/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20Pew%20Research,closely%20by%20Facebook%20and%20Snapchat>

<sup>48</sup> "TikTok - Make Your Day," n.d., [https://www.tiktok.com/@localboredchick/video/7224972789336378666?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&sender\\_device=pc&web\\_id=7326701595581826606](https://www.tiktok.com/@localboredchick/video/7224972789336378666?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7326701595581826606).

however, proved to have a much broader appeal with its eclectic cast of characters and silly and witty sense of humor. In 2007, Nielsen Media reported that 22% of the show's audience was between eighteen and forty-nine years of age.<sup>49</sup> Heather Hendershot, in her book *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, says this of the adults who watch *Spongebob Squarepants*: "According to the Nickelodeon logic, if adults are sometimes not stuffy, just as sometimes children are sometimes not innocent and naive, it proves (or disproves) nothing about the "essential nature" of adulthood or childhood; it proves only that adults and kids can play at being each other."<sup>50</sup> The multigenerational appeal of a show like *Spongebob Squarepants* taps into the inner child still present in adults.

Additionally, *Spongebob Squarepants* was popular during the years of millennials' childhood. The show is one of the most memed media pieces, calling back to some of the earliest episodes like "Evil Patrick," a popular reaction image used when someone is about to do something unsavory. The image is grabbed from the season one episode "Nature Pants." The memes that use older episodes touch upon nostalgia to tell a joke geared toward the millennial demographic that grew up watching the show. Similarly, *Bluey* has demonstrated its multi-generational appeal, with many millennials praising the show and comprising most of the fandom. Mira Mercado from *The Cut* describes *Bluey* as "...visual Xanax. It's got the low stakes of something like *Great British Bake Off* and the whimsy of *Sesame Street*. It's cute in a way that isn't overly saccharine, capturing the same sort of soft, sincere energy as a Pixar short. And the show is genuinely funny."<sup>51</sup> Instagram commenters on the show's official social media pages, like @Troublesome, have said, "Thank you, Bluey, for healing my inner child. I absolutely adore

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<sup>49</sup> Heather Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation The History, Politics, And Economics Of America's Only TV Channel For Kids*, New York University Press, 2004, 255

<sup>50</sup> Heather Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation*, 184

<sup>51</sup> Mia Mercado, "I Can't Shut Up About Bluey." *The Cut*, March 24, 2023, [www.thecut.com/2023/03/why-is-tiktok-obsessed-with-the-kids-tv-show-bluey.htm](http://www.thecut.com/2023/03/why-is-tiktok-obsessed-with-the-kids-tv-show-bluey.htm)

every episode.”<sup>52</sup> and many more like this, with each post getting hundreds to thousands of comments. Many viewers find the show to be a comfort and stress relief from their lives, with some saying it helps to heal their inner child that may not have had parents like Chili and Bandit. In conjunction with social media, these reviews have led adult fans to form a community online, becoming the *Bluey* fandom.

### **THE BLUEY FANDOM ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

In Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he states, “Far from being writers [...] readers are travelers, they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields, they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.”<sup>53</sup> In this quote, De Certeau refers to how fans will pick up a piece of media they had no part in creating and find their own meaning or enjoyment for themselves. In his work on fan studies *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins expands on Michel De Certeau’s ideas by saying, “Consumers are selective users of a vast media culture whose treasures, however corrupt, hold wealth that can be mined and refined for alternative uses [...]. [Fans] constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation.”<sup>54</sup> Fans take works of media, or “poach” them and make it their own through their versions of a pre-existing fictional universe such as fan fiction, or paint pictures (fan art), or discuss fan-generated theories such as ‘R+L=J’ from *Game Of Thrones* which provided a space for fans of the show to speculate whether Rhaegar Targaryen and Leanna Stark were Jon Snow’s parents, not Ned Stark as fans were lead to believe for four seasons. These forums similarly exist for *Bluey* fans, where they discuss

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<sup>52</sup> Mla Mercado, “I Can’t Shut Up About Bluey.”

<sup>53</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (University Of California Press, 1984), 174

<sup>54</sup> Henry Jenkins, “*Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 1988): 26-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038809366691>.

topics like the possibility of Uncle Rad and Frisky getting married in an upcoming episode. Textual poaching is also a part of participatory culture. Participatory culture is a term coined by Jenkins referring to fandom spaces where fans can share their works and form a community around a piece of media.<sup>55</sup> The fans of *Game Of Thrones*, or *Bluey*, who congregate on these social media platforms to share theories, fan fiction, and fan art, are taking part in participatory culture.

*Bluey*'s official presence on social media has also aided in the show's popularity. *Bluey*'s marketing team can use social media to grow its audience through interaction on various social media platforms. *Bluey* is not the first show to market through social media interaction. *Glee* (2009 - 2015), a show that rose to popularity by utilizing social media, used a similar technique to entice a youth audience, which was millennials at the time of initial popularity. Valerie Wee discusses *Glee*'s (2009 - 2015) rise to popularity through social media in her article "Spreading the *Glee*: Targeting a Youth Audience in the Multimedia, Digital Age." In this article, she outlines Fox's marketing strategy:

1. The exploitation of digital platforms and social networks to more efficiently promote *Glee* and mobilize fan activities on social media networks.
2. The careful use of Twitter to reinforce an ethos of interaction, community, and engagement between *Glee*'s stars and fans helped market the show, its stars, and the steadily expanding range of *Glee*-interrelated creative projects.
3. FOX uses digital media to attract youth back to the traditional experience of "appointment" television.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 339

<sup>56</sup> Valerie Wee "Youth Audiences and the Media in the Digital Era: The Intensification of Multimedia Engagement and Interaction." *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017), 306

The works of De Certeau and Jenkins are the basis for the transmedia marketing seen in *Glee* and *Bluey*. This marketing strategy is known as Web 2.0, and it is used to commodify and capitalize on participatory culture.<sup>57</sup> When the marketing team for *Bluey* adopted this strategy, they enticed millennials who are used to this kind of marketing and promoted interaction. The *Bluey* team would target millennials because they are now the parents of the show's target demographic. Public access shows like Sesame Street have even adopted the Web 2.0 marketing strategy. In January 2022, after the Rocco meme surfaced, the official Elmo Twitter page said, "Don't worry, everybody! Elmo and Zoe practiced sharing and are still best buds forever! Elmo loves you, Zoe! Hahaha!" This tweet isn't Sesame Street's first use of social media to promote the show. In February 2017, the puppet characters were featured on Wired's YouTube channel in an autocomplete interview, answering the most googled questions about the show. In November 2023, the channel posted a sequel to the first video to promote the show's 54th season. This kind of marketing is necessary as the world has become more reliant on social media for current events than traditional media outlets.

Similar to *Glee*, and *Bluey* rely on online fan activity to spread the word about the show. *Bluey* has official accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok. Across these various platforms, the marketing team has uploaded short clips from the show, craft projects to make props from the show, sketches from the art department, and announcements for new episodes. On YouTube, the team has uploaded a handful of full episodes to watch without having a streaming subscription. The official *Bluey* website and blog have a section dedicated to fan reactions. The section links to Tweets and TikToks, creating a loop of social media feeds to promote the show and encourage interaction with the fandom. *Bluey* has to approach appointment TV differently in the streaming era. Currently, *Bluey* is releasing season three in the

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<sup>57</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 360

U.S. through Disney +. The show is not released all at once or once a week but in small batches of about ten episodes, allowing audiences to binge-watch the show and tune in when the next sub-season is released. A similar tactic was used by Netflix when releasing *The Witcher*'s (2019 - present) third season.

Louisa Ellen Stein dives further into *Glee*'s use of social media to generate fandom, specifically, how it targets millennials. In the chapter "From Fandom to Gleekdom" in the book *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age*, she uses remix culture to explain how: "*Glee* depicts its millennial characters performing reinterpretations of music from past and present...,"<sup>58</sup> referencing Lawrence Lessig's "remix" description as: "a fundamental dynamic of our contemporary culture and vital to the continued health of a thriving public sphere. He describes our contemporary culture as a 'read/write' culture in which we do not only passively consume but rather rework and transform the cultural material we encounter."<sup>59</sup> Through the transmedia marketing method, millennials and fandom culture are inextricably linked. *Bluey* uses social media to market not only to children or millennial parents of preschool-aged children but also to childless adults who are primed for this sort of marketing and interaction with media online.

The official *Bluey* TikTok account has 3.4 million followers<sup>60</sup>, Instagram has 981 thousand followers<sup>61</sup>, and the official *Bluey* Youtube channel has 5.46 million subscribers<sup>62</sup>—the TikTok page posts short clips of the funniest moments from the episodes. TikTok is the social media site that aided *Bluey* the most in its rise in popularity, as TikTok is currently the

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<sup>58</sup> Louisa Ellen Stein "From Fandom to Gleekdom." In *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age*, (University Of Iowa Press, n.d.),57

<sup>59</sup> Ibid,57

<sup>60</sup> Official Bluey TikTok "TikTok -Bluey," n.d.

<sup>61</sup> Official Bluey Instagram page, Blueyofficialtv n.d. <https://www.instagram.com/officialblueytv/?hl=en>.

<sup>62</sup> Official Bluey YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@BlueyOfficialChannel>



fastest-growing social media site.<sup>63</sup> Currently, the platform has roughly 1.2 billion users. TikTok then allows other users to take the audio of these clips and make their own version of jokes or memes. For example, an audio clip of Bluey's sister Bingo saying, "airport I'm not going to the airport" in her Queensland accent has been sampled and used in nearly 125,200 subsequent videos. The memes made from this audio are usually about someone being excited for a trip in some form. Whether intentional or not, the transmedia marketing strategy utilized by Ludo Studios to promote the show fostered an interactive space that allowed a fandom to grow.

It is important to note *Bluey's* transmedia marketing strategy because it is a marketing strategy that is mutually beneficial for studios and fans. Marketing is designed to promote a piece of media so audiences are tempted to watch, subscribe to streaming services, and sell merchandise to gain a profit. Transmedia marketing, or the expansion of the narrative world across various media platforms, is typically practiced by both producers and consumers. Examples of *Bluey* produced transmedia marketing include: *Bluey: The Video Game* and a collaboration with the property marketplace "Domain" to turn the Heeler home into an actual listing coinciding with season 3 episode 49, "The Sign." Marketing for "The Sign" was the show's largest transmedia marketing campaign to date. The campaign included hints being dropped across the show's official social media platforms about a wedding, the Heeler house going on sale, and a landing page on the official *Bluey* website giving viewers all the details leading up to the release of the twenty eight minute episode.<sup>64</sup> This campaign activated the fandom as fans theorized the possible outcome of the episode, creating a loop of constant promotion for the episode. This exhibition of millennial play demonstrates characterizations of

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<sup>63</sup> Tamilore Oladipo, "23 Top Social Media Sites for Your Brand in 2024, Ranked," Buffer Library, January 22, 2024, <https://buffer.com/library/social-media-sites/>.

<sup>64</sup> Mia Fileman, "the Signs' Were All There: Why Bluey's Latest Episode Was a Marketing Masterclass," SmartCompany, April 16, 2024, <https://www.smartcompany.com.au/marketing/the-sign-blueys-latest-episode-marketing-masterclass/>

play as self-motivated fans expressed excitement as well as an engagement of their imagination to create theories and content as a fun activity for themselves and to share with others. The interactivity of social media allowed fans to play with one another and create a shared memory surrounding the hype of a new and mysterious episode. The transmedia marketing of “The Sign” benefited fans and as they were able to play online as the events of the episode were slowly revealed leading up to the premiere.

*Bluey* producers benefit from users continually posting and participating in fandom, sharing fan art, fan fiction, YouTube videos, and TikToks. The show gets free publicity, evidenced by a Reddit thread on r/bluey posted by user “SuperFrenchGirl ” asking, “How did you find *Bluey*? How did you become a fan? Did you know it was way more than a kids' show?” The responses span from seeing ads for Disney+ to fan-generated content like the response from “Glythical201, “I saw a random post on Twitter, which I never go on, and, like some sort of divine providence, was gifted this show. I’m 19, and I struggle with some family trauma, and I kinda needed to grow up fast, so watching this show really resonates with the kid in me and makes me feel loved and safe.”<sup>65</sup> The more fans post, the more word spreads. Therefore, the studios and streaming platforms receive more money.

Fans benefit from their participation in transmedia marketing because it leads to more connections for fandom and community. *Bluey* fans have expanded beyond the show's official sites and connectivity points. There is a wiki fandom site. The website has pages dedicated to character profiles, episode pages with synopses, fun facts, and a link to a Discord page. There is also a Reddit page, “r/Bluey”. This page has 162K followers and is in the top 1% of popular pages. The page's description reads, “A big-hearted animated series about a family of Australian

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<sup>65</sup> Unofficial Bluey Reddit  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/bluey/comments/txmmfe/how\\_did\\_you\\_find\\_blueybecome\\_a\\_fanknow\\_it\\_was\\_way/](https://www.reddit.com/r/bluey/comments/txmmfe/how_did_you_find_blueybecome_a_fanknow_it_was_way/)

Heeler dogs. The ultimate kids' show for grownups.”<sup>66</sup> The page also includes a list of community rules moderators strictly enforce. Both sites have no official ties to the show or Ludo Studios. These fan-created sites aim for adult fans to create a community of people interested in the show. The play element is evident when users make a post for others to enjoy. As previously discussed, fans use media to fulfill their needs, to reach a state of play, and with places like “r/Bluey” and the wiki fandom site that are entirely fan-run and separate from the corporate marketing pages. In addition, textual poaching and remix culture allow fans to make and show their memes to others. Posts made by fans exist in a copyright gray area. Fans cannot monetize their content that uses copyrighted materials.<sup>67</sup> Lessig argued, “All culture builds on and with the culture that came before, and that our copyright laws have been twisted by corporate interests to overlook this fact.”<sup>68</sup> But unlike the posts made by the official pages, the point of fandom on social media is not to make money but to connect with others to do something creative and have fun. Memes are made to make others laugh. The fandom has poached *Bluey* and taken on a different life via social media.

The *Bluey* fandom engages in remix culture through fan art on sites like Instagram and YouTube for fan theories. A popular fan theorist is YouTube creator “Aussie Girl Margie,” who routinely analyzes episodes for her site. For example, in the episode “Onesies,” *Bluey*’s Aunt Brandy comes to visit. The family has not seen Brandy in four years. Throughout the episode, it is implied that there has been a rift between Brandy and Chili. Through analysis of another episode titled “The Show,” a fan theory has emerged that both Brandy and Chili struggle with fertility issues. Creator Joe Brumm later confirmed the theory in an interview with the blog

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<sup>66</sup> Unofficial *Bluey* Reddit page, r/Bluey <https://www.reddit.com/r/bluey/>

<sup>67</sup> Office, “Fair Use (FAQ) | U.S. Copyright Office.”

<sup>68</sup> Louisa Ellen Stein “From Fandom to Gleekdom.” In *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia*, 57

“Wellington Mom,” stating, “The Show indeed does point at Chili having a miscarriage.”<sup>69</sup> The comment section for “Aussie Girl Margie” is filled with fans praising the show for its approach to the topic, with the user “@lunasherlockcasers” commenting, “First cartoon that ever made me cry in relief, I can now compare myself to Auntie Brandy...I loved this series way before, but "Onesies" made it onto another level.”<sup>70</sup> Returning to the definitions of play from Huzinga and Dr. Brown, “Aussie Girl Margie” fosters engagement with the show, and subsequent fandom is a form of play. The speculative theories “Aussie Girl Margie” poses require imagination and creativity. She has also reached a state of play through content creation, a creative, mentally engaging, and enjoyable activity, leading to stress relief.

Similarly, the social aspect of the platform where “Aussie Girl Margie” shares her videos is engaging and fun and leads to a sense of community. By poaching from *Bluey*, “Aussie Girl Margie” has engaged with uses and gratifications theory and reached a state of play. Other content creators include the YouTuber “Pugly.” This creator started posting about *Bluey* in 2022. With his professional background in childcare, Pugly’s content focuses on the emotional impact of the lessons through scene analysis. Recently, he posted a video titled “How Bluey Changed My Life (Healing Past Trauma)”<sup>71</sup>, discussing his emotional ties to the show. In this, he discusses how seeing a neurodivergent character named Jack on-screen work through his struggles helped him get the support he needed for his issues. He also cites the episodes “Promises” and “Sleepytime.” as particularly poignant for him because they feature lines from Chilli and Bandit that reassure Bluey and Bingo that they will always love and care for them. The video's comment section agrees with commenters like @Nutellacat, saying, “People dare say it's just a kid’s show.

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<sup>69</sup> Aussie Girl Margie, “Bluey ONESIES: Aunt Brandy’s Infertility, Miscarriage Theory, Easter Eggs & Breakdown Season 3 Ep 31,” July 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14CQPpiR9uU>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Pugly, “How Bluey Changed My Life (Healing Past Trauma),” January 27, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBTE2azl-ZE>.

*Bluey* also helped me so much not only heal my inner child but some episodes gave me a sense of comfort as if *Bluey* is saying ‘hey, you are gonna be okay!’” or from @slime-studios “Bluey is, for me, one of the best shows because it is beautifully drawn, has life lessons in it, and its story is better than any other kid's show. This show seems like a kid's show at first, but when you realize what it really is, you can’t let go. It is really amazing”.<sup>72</sup> Content creators like Pugly use the show for affective and emotional uses as outlined by Ruggiero. Pugly has chosen *Bluey* because of how the show makes him feel and has helped him work through personal trauma. Despite the heavy topic discussed by Pugly, there is a play element to his videos. Similar to Aussie Girl Margie through the act of content creation. The social aspect is also seen in Pugly’s video’s comment section. Other users who have commented have also claimed that they enjoy *Bluey* for similar emotional reasons. The *Bluey* fandom has formed an online community that provides social interaction and plays through textual poaching of their chosen show.

Content from creators like Pugly and Aussie Girl Margie is also a part of remix and participatory culture within fan studies and textual poaching. Fink Moritz explores these two theories in “Echoes of Springfield: The Simpsons in Remix Culture.” Moritz uses Limor Shifman’s *Memes in Digital Culture* to describe remix culture: “While replication and mimesis have always been characteristics of fan creativity (see Hills 2014), they are also key features of digital remix culture. Media derivatives created by fans and other cultural producers might be redundant and replicative. However, at the same time, these unofficial paratexts operate under alternative logics.”<sup>73</sup> Moritz does a deep dive into how *The Simpsons (1989-)* fans engage with their fandom, primarily online through memes, fan art, fan fiction, and YouTube. “YouTube offers an infrastructure where amateur producers can circulate and share ‘unofficial’ media

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Fink, Moritz. *Understanding The Simpsons: Animating the Politics and Poetics of Participatory Culture*, (S.I.: AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021), 161

content. Answering the conditions of a visually centered multimedia culture, YouTube has emerged as one of the most prominent social media platforms, not only as a means of storage for archiving purposes but also as an interactive device for widely circulating and sharing media content created by its users.”<sup>74</sup>As previously discussed, using social media to participate in fandom fulfills emotional and social needs via uses and gratifications, as well as helping adults reach a state of play through creating memes and other forms of content creation. While the Simpsons fandom creates fan works that are grittier than the ones made by Bluey fans (this is due to the content and target demographics of each respective show), the platforms utilized and reasons for use are similar, if not the same.

## **CONCLUSION**

Animation has been an undertheorized aspect of film and media studies. Even with the medium's long history, it is still heavily tied to children's media, another section of film and media studies that is undertheorized. This essay discusses animation as more than a film form exclusive to children's media. It expands on how animation appeals to a wide range of ages—using nostalgia to explain why adults enjoy animated works aimed at children.

Additionally, this essay builds upon Jenkins' work on fandom, not just what fans do online but why they do it and how it is beneficial to participate in online fandoms as a form of play. This theoretical framework is crucial in understanding the *Bluey* fandom within the millennial demographic and its unique characteristics. As a generation, millennials are often falsely defined as being coddled and ill-prepared for life due to helicopter parenting. Instead, data suggests that millennials work more often than previous generations. The millennial generation also witnessed traumatic world events unfold early in their lives, leading to higher rates of anxiety, a greater distrust in the American government, and disbelief in American

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 180

excellence than those from previous generations. These events and characteristics combine to form a generation that desires gentle and nostalgic media to escape the turbulent world. *Bluey* provides a respite to that turbulent world. This essay is dedicated to exploring the prevalence of the *Bluey* fandom within the millennial demographic, particularly in the context of animation. It aims to delve into the reasons behind this phenomenon, the impact of *Bluey*'s transmedia marketing, and the show's unique appeal to millennials.

*Bluey* is a piece of media that draws on a long history of children's educational media, animation history, and family-centered content. These three media types merge in *Bluey* form through its color palette, storytelling, score, and comedy. Through these elements, Adults who interact with the fandom online achieve a state of play through solo and community-based activities. The solo activities include the creation of memes, TikToks, and YouTube videos. Community activities are seen in comment sections as fans engage in conversation. These fulfill emotional and social needs as per the uses and gratifications theory. *Bluey*'s transmedia marketing follows the models set by shows like *Glee*, targeting the millennial demographic specifically through social media. This marketing strategy mutually benefits both the studios and the fans, as the more posts made, the more money and free publicity for the studios. However, the fans ultimately benefit more as they gain a community and a piece of media they can poach, remix, and make their own. *Bluey* has many appeals; it can appeal to various audiences differently. Many episodes are about playing and creating new memories with loved ones. The play aspect of nostalgia benefits people who want to remember their childhood or see an alternative to their own. The stories about personal issues appeal to those who struggle with them. The stories about being playful and silly appeal to adults, who feel they lack that bit of fun, color, and adventure.

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