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Playing the Archive

From the Opies to the
digital playground

Edited by
Andrew Burn,
John Potter,
Kate Cowan and
Julia Bishop



UCLPRESS

Playing the Archive

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 **UCLPRESS**

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This book is dedicated to Iona and Peter Opie, on whose lasting legacy our work is built.

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Professor John Potter is Professor of Media in Education at UCL, in the Institute of Education (IOE) Faculty of Education and Society. His research, teaching and publications are in the fields of new literacies, media education, play on- and offscreen, curation and agency in social media, and the changing nature of learning in the context of digital media. He is co-editor of the journal *Learning, Media and Technology*. He is the Director of ReMAP (Research in Media Arts and Play), a research collaborative based in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media at the UCL Knowledge Lab and at UCL East. John worked as a co-investigator on *Playing the Archive* and then as Principal Investigator on 'A National Observatory of Children's Play Experiences during Covid-19' (funded by the ESRC).

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Preface

This book presents outcomes, analysis and discussion from a large research project on children's play, *Playing the Archive: Memory, community and mixed reality play*, conducted between 2017 and 2019.¹ Central to the project was the Archive of Iona and Peter Opie at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, which contains the bulk of the papers left by the renowned play researchers Iona and Peter Opie. Of particular interest to our project were the responses from an estimated 15,000 children to surveys conducted by the Opies between 1950 and 1980, though chapters in this book also refer to correspondence with adults contained in the archive.

The objectives of the project are outlined in [Chapter 1](#). They included digitising and cataloguing the archive, creating innovative forms of access through mixed-reality media and conducting new ethnographies of play in playgrounds in Sheffield and London.

We expected to focus on particular themes throughout the project – in particular, memory, place, time, childhood, and of course the complex relations between these elements and play itself in all its kaleidoscopic forms. In our many meetings to discuss and analyse what we were finding – in the archive, in the playgrounds, in our exploration of mixed-reality technologies – we approached these themes in various ways. We considered the nature of archives and their notoriously contradictory features, and how our project might work to re-animate archival material. We considered the role of memory, though also how both adults and children forget – how they once played, or where their games come from. We considered what aspects of play emerged from the archive, beginning with an 'unboxing' of the Opies' papers in an early visit to the Bodleian. Some of these aspects we anticipated, from the selections of the survey responses published in the Opies' books, which are frequently cited in the chapters of this book (in particular, Opie and Opie, 1959; 1969; 1985; 1997). Other aspects were more unexpected, revealing not only vignettes of games and play in individual accounts, but sometimes epistolary conversations both with children and adults, conducted over time (see [Chapter 2](#) for extended discussion of these).

We also discussed at length how we might use forms of digital media to mediate the archive anew. Our team from the Centre for Advanced

Spatial Analysis (CASA) at The Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL explored an exciting range of mixed-reality solutions: augmented reality projections of virtual children over the real landscape, revoicing extracts from the archive; animations of child avatars performing dance moves motion-captured from actual children; 360-degree imaging and sound from the playgrounds we were investigating. The prototype we settled on in the end was a surprise: a retro-technology creation in which games from the archive, revoiced by today's children in London, Sheffield, Cardiff and Aberdeen, could be dialled up from a red telephone box, which can be seen on the cover of the book. This and other solutions provoked conversations about the nature of the interfaces through which archives might be made to 'speak'; and they are described in [Chapter 7](#). These red telephone boxes have had a busy life. One version was installed at the Young V&A, where we observed visiting parents and children busily dialling up the games of the archive (as well as stress-testing the apparatus!). After the museum closed for refurbishment, it was moved to the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), where it still represents the project. Meanwhile, another version was installed in an exhibition at the Site Gallery in Sheffield, and is currently held at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. A third version, from the CASA premises on Tottenham Court Road, has been reinstalled in UCL's new campus in East London, in the Pool Street building, where it stands as an example of creative technology in the service of culture and society, in a new academic hub devoted to precisely that end.

Finally, of course, we spent a good deal of time discussing what we were finding on today's playgrounds. What forms of play would have been instantly – or even distantly – recognisable to the Opies? What would take them by surprise? How would the children on these twenty-first-century playgrounds react to replicas of the archival records of games from the 1950s and 1960s (crumpled and tea-bag-stained in the best pedagogic tradition)? What kinds of collective memory might be in evidence? And how would the media cultures of the twenty-first century feed into play repertoires, as the media cultures of the 1950s had found their way into the rituals, narratives and landscapes of play of that time?

Like most teams in major research projects, we did not start from scratch, and readers may find it useful to understand something of our extensive backstory. Several members of our team first came together in 2009 for what is in many ways a sister project, Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age.² This project revolved around another part of the Opie Archive: in this case the collection of audiotapes

recorded by Iona Opie in her fieldwork with children, and now deposited at the British Library. In this project we likewise digitised the audio collection, making it available online to researchers as The Opie Collection of Children's Games and Songs.³

As in *Playing the Archive*, we sought to augment the archive with ethnographies of play in contemporary playgrounds, where kiss-chase, counting-out and hand-clapping co-existed with re-enactments of videogames and mimicry of dance music on YouTube; and we aimed to remediate the games of the past with forms of digital media. These included animations made by children of their parents' and grandparents' games; a prototype computer programme which recorded and played back the movements of clapping games; and a documentary film, screened at the end of the project and again towards the end of *Playing the Archive*.⁴ We also worked with the British Library to construct a website, *Playtimes: A century of children's games and rhymes*, which includes examples from the Opie collection, the children's animations, video and audio material collected in our ethnographic fieldwork, and short video commentaries by members of the team as well as collaborating experts Steve Roud and Michael Rosen. At the time of writing, the website is unfortunately down following a major cyber-attack suffered by the British Library, but the videos can currently be viewed on the Library's YouTube channel.⁵

The project produced a number of publications, in particular a co-authored collection focused on the ethnographic work, *Children, Media and Playground Cultures: Ethnographic studies of school playtimes* (Willett et al., 2013); and an edited collection covering all aspects of the project, *Children's Games in the New Media Age: Childlore, media and the playground* (Burn and Richards, 2014).

We have also drawn on the work of a long-running project initially directed by Professor Jackie Marsh under the auspices of the British Academy: *Childhoods and Play: The Iona and Peter Opie Archive*, with then co-directors Dr Julia Bishop and Professor Andrew Burn.⁶ This project helped us to move forward with work on the Opie Archive and the lives of the Opies, supported by an active advisory panel representing a range of scholarship as well as relevant institutions, notably the Bodleian, the British Library, the Folklore Society and the Museum of Childhood, now the Young V&A. The project is associated with a number of publications on play, childhood and the Opies (e.g. Marsh, 2013; Marsh and Bishop, 2014; Bishop, 2014). The project continues its work, now under the directorship of Dr Yinka Olusoga, with co-directors Dr Julia Bishop and Professor John Potter.

Just over a year after the conclusion of *Playing the Archive*, the world succumbed to the global Covid-19 pandemic. The ensuing lockdowns affected the nature of play as they affected every other sphere of human activity. Professor John Potter and colleagues initiated a new project: the International Play Observatory, funded by the ESRC,⁷ which studied how play, though it retreated from many public spaces, found ways to flourish in den-building, neighbourhood play, adaptive use of media and a myriad of micro-ludic practices. Although it followed *Playing the Archive*, this project, with several members of the original team, conducted its research during the writing of this book, and its insights have informed our understanding of contemporary play, particularly feeding into [Chapter 11](#).

Readers interested in these projects and the Opie Archive may wish to explore the portal devised specifically to bring these entities together: *The Opie Archive*.⁸ This portal is a British Academy project, but serves as the entry point to the catalogue created by Julia Bishop and Steve Roud during *Playing the Archive*. This sophisticated tool allows for searches of the manuscript archives by a range of fields, content words and dates. A simple search for 'hopscotch', for example, produces 31 returns from the 1950s. The portal also gathers together links to all the projects mentioned in this Preface.

Finally, readers of this book may appreciate a few words on the nature of the research teams across these projects, from UCL and the University of Sheffield, and beyond. Today's academic institutions make much of the principle of interdisciplinarity, though quite what this means can vary considerably across contexts. A straightforward understanding of it might refer simply to the range of specialist expertise within a project; and this is a notable feature of our teams, which have included specialists in Folklore Studies, Media and Cultural Studies, Education, Dialectology, Architecture and Landscape Architecture, Computer Science and Semiotics. However, such lists do not guarantee, or fully indicate, the qualities of collaborative effort required to construct complex multidisciplinary approaches to the investigation of play, and to the analysis of the bewildering array of linguistic, sensory, musical, spatial and haptic information such projects gather, and the sociocultural contexts from which it emerges. The chapters in this book give some idea of the innovative methodological work such collaboration produced in this and in the sister projects, including the recruitment of children themselves as researchers, and of the interplay of theoretical frameworks needed to make sense of the findings, evolving gradually over 15 years of conversation. They may not give a full sense, however, of

the tangible experiences of opening archival boxes in library basements, of researchers embedded in noisy playgrounds, of tinkering with code and circuit boards in labs, of building phone boxes and hooking up motion capture networks, of working attentively to capture fleeting nuances of language, dialect, humour, wordplay in children's talk. This kind of business, recognised by current accounts of methodology as productively 'messy' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008), isn't always visible in books and articles.

It remains to say that, throughout these projects, we have returned not only to the astonishing wealth of material in the Opie Archive, but to the Opies' own methods of working and of making sense of what they found. We were fortunate to have found a collaborator with a unique perspective as the grandson of the Opies, Dr Michael Eades, who presents a sense of the geographical, cultural and historical context of their work in the form of a playful stroll through London's Bloomsbury district in [Chapter 3](#). Though they were primarily folklorists, they were scrupulous about details of language and about histories of play. Their work has been recognised as anthropology, as a forerunner to what we now call the new sociology of childhood, and, though they worked before the very idea of media scholarship was conceived, they were remarkably attentive to the importance of children's media cultures. If we have managed to continue something of this spirit of open-mindedness in our interdisciplinary conversations, then we will have done some justice to the nature of children's play, which, as we have found like the Opies before us, respects no boundaries.

Andrew Burn
Cambridge, July 2024

Notes

- 1 Funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; conducted by research teams from UCL and the University of Sheffield.
- 2 Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2009 to 2011.
- 3 <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Opie-collection-of-children-s-games-and-songs-4>.
- 4 'Ipidipidation my Generation!' A 40-minute documentary by Grethe Mitchell. See also Mitchell, 2023.
- 5 British Library YouTube at: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVRvouzCZmFeg8_SSILcBFWiHC9406Ycf&si=KhbTeqcgBp5RAmNi (accessed 14 October 2024).
- 6 British Academy, at: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/academy-research-projects-childhoods-and-play> (accessed 14 October 2024).
- 7 Play Observatory blog: <https://play-observatory.com> (accessed 14 October 2024).
- 8 The Opie Archive: <https://www.opiearchive.org> (accessed 14 October 2024).

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Note on the text

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee in December 2017. Pseudonyms are used for all children throughout the book. In line with the consent given by research participants, schools in the Sheffield ethnographic study and the schools in Cardiff and Aberdeen who contributed recordings and drawings are referred to by name, whereas the London schools have been anonymised.

Play: archive, interface, repertoire

Andrew Burn

Of time machines and telephone boxes

Our book cover shows a red telephone box, installed in the foyer of the Museum of Childhood in East London, now renamed the Young V&A. You can see a parent kneeling outside the box, and just make out a child inside, using the phone. The child is calling up the past. When the number connects, the voices of children speak, sing, describe, perform games from the 1950s and '60s: from the street and playground, from urban and rural spaces, from parks, housing estates and wild spaces. The child might have dialled the number 19530, which the telephone directory shows as 'I'm gan awa in a train', a Scottish ball game from 1953. Or perhaps the number 19541, 'Knockdown Ginger', which needs little explanation ([Figure 1.1](#)).

The voices represent an archive of play, and the telephone box is a portal or interface providing playful access to it. Archives are time machines, in this case bridging two worlds of play: the 1950s and the 2010s. Readers may be reminded a little of the resemblance of the phone box to Dr Who's time machine, the Tardis, in the long-running UK sci-fi series; and indeed this similarity was noted by one of our child participants. The child in the image, wrestling with the unfamiliar dial, entering the audio space of 70 years ago, hearing games which may be very different, or may be strikingly similar, to those she plays today, is, then, a time traveller, a visitor to the play of the past. The archive lying behind this portal is a series of cardboard boxes in Oxford's Bodleian Libraries, containing the extraordinary manuscript collection of folklorists Iona and Peter Opie. The little bit of magic conjured by the telephone apparatus and the children's voices is a kind of performance of

Time Telephone Directory	
	
Games	
Ball Game - My lad's a Millionaire.....	19524
Ball Game - Policeman Policeman.....	19525
Ball Game - I'm gan awa in a train.....	19530
Sappy Soldiers.....	19605
Marble Words	19606
Ring a Roses	19603
Hide and Seek.....	64516
Knock up Ginger.....	64517
Marble Words - version 2	64519
Mob.....	64520
Rhymes	
No More School - version 1.....	19545
No More School - version 2.....	19546
No More School - version 3.....	19547
Johnny on the Ocean.....	19543
Three Six Nine.....	19831
Teddy Bear.....	20181
Vote Vote Vote.....	19521
Ten O'Clock is ringing.....	19522
St. Valentine's Day.....	19527
Skypping	19529

Figure 1.1 Directory for the *Time Telephone*. © UCL, 2019.

that archive, made by our researchers and collaborating primary schools across the UK regions and nations, as will become apparent.

The story behind the telephone box, the archive and the project which generated this book begins with the work of the Opies. Our project, *Playing the Archive: Memory, community and mixed reality play*,¹ concluded in 2019, an important moment for the understanding of children's play: it was the 60th anniversary of the 1959 publication of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Opie and Opie, 1959). The Opies' book was based on a unique piece of research of impressive proportions, all the more impressive because the authors were independent scholars, without the benefits of institutional support, research council funding or the other advantages we enjoy today. Their apparently simple but effective idea was to invite submissions of accounts of children's play written by children themselves, from across the UK. The result was thousands of sheets of paper, submitted mostly

by schools, in which roughly 15,000 children described games that ranged across a bewildering diversity of genres, from marbles, chasing games and choosing games to songs, rhymes, superstitions, jokes and hoaxes, dressing up and drama. The eventual home of these sheets of paper in the Bodleian Libraries, and their status as an archive of play, forms a central part of the project which we describe and reflect on in the following chapters. The complexity of relationships between the Opies and their correspondents, both children and adults, is unpicked in [Chapter 2](#), which seeks to characterise the modes of research the Opies employed and the conversations that often evolved with their contributors.

Following in the Opies' footsteps, this too is a book about children's play and games. But it is also a book about how we remember, observe, record and research this play and these games. For children, play and games are immediate, performative, breathless actions of the moment, though they may draw on cultural resources which could be centuries old, or may be born of the digital era, this history is invisible to them. Yet the dynamic texture of their play, the rhythm of its action, the patterns of its vernacular poetry, the material fabric of the quotidian objects recruited to its purpose, rest on layers of inherited folklore, media culture and collective memory. This latter quality is a curious one: children forget that they remember, or at least their cultural memory recedes with distance. They remember the game they were taught yesterday, but have no resource to know how it may have lived through generations before that, how the games they play are benignly haunted by the ghosts of their ancestors. Meanwhile, the resources for play derived from children's media cultures have grown in importance over the short century which spans the Opies' work and our own, as [Chapter 6](#) demonstrates.

In *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, the Opies categorised the games, mapped their histories and propounded a central thesis: that playground lore was the culture of a particular social group, often hidden from the adult gaze, and as worthy of respect and study as the culture of any other social group. In this respect, they championed an anthropological view of childhood as a state of being, rather than the developmental view of it as a state of becoming, a rehearsal for adulthood. This emphasis was to be further developed by the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), who fiercely opposed what he called the 'progression rhetoric' used by adults to describe play in the service of development and education.

But if the Opies were anthropologists, or even forerunners of what we know today as the new sociology of childhood, they were also

folklorists, and saw the play of children as a specific form of children's folklore, subject to the same processes of oral transmission, continuity and change as other forms of folk culture. In this respect, the importance of their work lay in its ability to demonstrate that these cultural practices in Britain (and internationally, as other researchers have found) did not die out, as was popularly imagined, but flourished in spite of their apparent invisibility to the adult gaze, in rural playgrounds, in housing estates, in London, Aberdeen, Cardiff, Newcastle and Sheffield, in the streets, alleyways and schools of city, town and village, and even in the wild places of wastelands and woods.

They characterised this moment as the beginning of a new Elizabethan age, in the austerity of post-war Britain, but with an optimistic eye to a future where children would supplement the traditional songs, rhymes and movements of the old games with a dazzling variety of material from contemporary culture, often mischievously transformed: radio and television theme songs, pop songs, TV adverts, film and stage musicals, cartoons and comics. In this respect, they anticipated what today is a substantial field of research into children's media cultures. In recent years, approaches to these cultures have often been located in cultural studies, characterised by theoretical models of popular culture which trace their origins to writers like Raymond Williams. Williams' conception of popular culture might appear to be remote from the Opies' idea of children's folklore, yet both are attentive to the minutiae of cultural practice, to the social warp and weft which shapes it, to the histories which lie behind it and to the affective charge which animates it, which Williams memorably called a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961: 47–9).

The Opies went on to follow up this landmark work of the 1950s with further research, and more books. One of these holds particular significance for our work: *The Singing Game*, published in 1985 by Iona Opie, after Peter's death in 1982. This book was based on a rather different kind of research, effectively ethnographic fieldwork, though also in the rich tradition of folk song collecting in the early twentieth century, represented by the work, among others, of Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood and Ralph Vaughan Williams in the UK, and collectors such as James Madison Carpenter and Alan Lomax in the United States (for further discussion, see Bishop, 2021). This work saw Iona Opie travel with her trusty tape recorder to playgrounds across the UK, talking to children about their games, observing them in detail, and recording what she heard. The fieldwork produced a great quantity of material, but the focus of the book was on games which featured songs, such as the genre

of hand-clapping games, by this time very extensive, featuring complex clapping routines accompanied by songs which ranged from folkloric material to music-hall, from theme tunes to TV programmes such as *Popeye the Sailor* or *The Saint*, to rhymes imagining the life course of a girl, from baby, through teenager and mother, to granny and ghost; from pop songs to parodies of hymns and carols. This collection of audio recordings, housed in the British Library, formed the core of a previous project of our team, described in detail in Willett et al., 2013 and Burn and Richards, 2014.²

Once again, the message of the work was that games which the adult world imagined were extinct, driven out by the contemporary media cultures of television, film and popular music, were in fact flourishing and happily accommodating these new resources. And once again, this accommodation brings this cultural world closer to the world of children's media cultures, and to the territory of today's media scholars, than might be imagined.

The Opies, then, are the people with whose work our project begins. In *Playing the Archive*, we had three broad objectives:

- to digitise the Opie manuscript archive at the Bodleian Libraries, and to develop a new catalogue, housed at the Sheffield Digital Humanities Institute, and searchable via a new portal pulling together the various archives and projects containing the Opies' work: the Opie Archive³
- to develop innovative digital interfaces through which the archive could be animated, reimaged and experienced by audiences young and old
- to conduct new ethnographies of play in playgrounds in London and Sheffield, in order to sample recent forms of continuity and change in play and games

The chapters and parts of the book present the findings and outcomes of this project. In the process, we examine the Opies' working methods and legacy, but also explore the other people involved in this long history of play and games: the researchers who follow on, adults from the generation observed by the Opies, and, most importantly, the generations of children who both inherit and remake these games. It is their work and agency that the parts of this book address.

The first part, 'The people in the archive', focuses on the manuscript archive at the Bodleian, and on the work of the Opies themselves. It examines the astonishing breadth, depth and vision of their achievement

and working methods, how it was both scholarly and playful, and describes what we hope to contribute to the understanding of their legacy. [Chapter 2](#), by Catherine Bannister, Julia Bishop and Alison Somerset-Ward, considers what we can learn from this ‘multi-vocal archive’ about adult understandings of play as well as children’s contributions, and what we can learn about the Opies’ working methods. [Chapter 3](#), by Michael Eades, who has the advantage of being the Opies’ grandson, locates their work geographically, historically and methodologically in the form of a playful walk through London’s Bloomsbury district. [Chapter 4](#) begins with an exploration of accounts of subversive and risky play in the archive by Bannister and Bishop, followed by a bridge to the ethnographic work of the project by John Potter and Kate Cowan, who pursue this theme into the forms of phantasmagoric play they detect in today’s playgrounds.

The second part, ‘Capturing play’, picks up the transition at the end of the previous part to the ethnographic work conducted by the project in contemporary playgrounds. In [Chapter 5](#), Kate Cowan, John Potter and Valerio Signorelli look at ways in which the project used methods informed by the Opies’ work, and insights gained from the archive, to record and document play in today’s playgrounds, expanding traditional ethnographic methods into forms of digital imaging and sound capture. [Chapter 6](#), by Potter and Cowan, considers evidence of children’s engagement with the virtual playgrounds of videogames and social media. [Chapter 7](#), by Signorelli, Leah Lovett, Andy Hudson-Smith and Duncan Hay, considers how play, from the archive to the patterns of twenty-first-century play, can be represented to visitors in the context of museums and galleries, using a range of interactive interfaces, and problematising the notion of the interface itself using examples from technologies both ‘new’ (virtual, augmented and mixed reality) and ‘old’ (telephone kiosks and playing cards).

The third part, ‘Play in space and time’, takes a wider look at the themes of memory, time and space across this project and its earlier sister projects, all rooted in the work of the Opies. [Chapter 8](#), by Helen Woolley and Alison Somerset-Ward, explores what we learn from the archive about the found spaces of play in the post-war years and the affordances they offered, and how the Opies represented and discussed these spaces in their books. [Chapter 9](#), by Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop, takes a long look across the precursor projects through to this one, to show how play is layered across space and time, following ‘meshworks’ and ‘playlines’ indicative of play as part of children’s way of life. Lastly, Bishop presents, in [Chapter 10](#), evidence from fieldwork in the project of ways in which

the memory of play both long past and recent can inform intergenerational conversations.

The final part, 'Future play', consists of the concluding chapter. Here, two members of the team who have worked on successor projects, John Potter and Kate Cowan, consider how the insights of the project and of the Opies can help us to understand the nature of play as it is now and as it might be in the future, incorporating work on play in the Covid-19 pandemic, play in the age of digital surveillance and play in the age of networked media.

Behind these parts and chapters lies a set of relations between three entities which, between them, conduct the ways in which people experience play, its histories and its immediate manifestations: the archive, the repertoire and the interface. These relations, imagined as a circuit, form the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

The Circuit of Play

The thousands of sheets of paper referred to on the first page of this chapter, deposited in cardboard boxes at the Bodleian Libraries, are at the core of our project. We aimed to digitise the *archive*, making it available to the public for the first time, and to catalogue it in innovative ways which recognise the complexity of categories suggested by genres, types, locations, contents, nomenclatures and patterns apparent in the games described by those children long ago. We aimed to devise new forms of digital *interface* through which today's audiences could experience this archive afresh, not only as a collection of documents but in ways which would resurrect the imagery, physical modes of play and voices of the past. And we aimed to study how the archive related to the play we found on today's playgrounds, the live *repertoire* of our particular historical moment.

As we look back on our project, these entities – the *archive*, the *interface*, the *repertoire* – begin to resemble not so much a linear progression as a kind of circuit. The archive is both an end: of the Opies' extraordinary mass observation; and a beginning: of the long process of memory, analysis, interpretation, addition, supplement. The repertoire, meanwhile, 'speaks' to the archive in various ways (it offers to expand it, for example); and it functions as a living, vernacular archive, since children draw on the games, rhymes, rituals and songs offered to them by the oral tradition. They curate their repertoire, in the sense that Potter (2012) describes: they collect, select, order, display, interpret and effect

regimes of cultural value. Meanwhile, both these kinds of archive – the literal archive of the library and the living archive of the child – can only communicate through different kinds of interface. We will describe in this book how these vary from the more familiar (such as library catalogues and interaction between people through language, action, gesture and other modes) to forms of digital experiment in mixed reality.

The nodes of this circuit feed into one another. The archive, once accessed in various ways, can become again a performative repertoire as the voices of the past are enabled by digital interfaces to speak anew. The repertoire, as well as being a living archive, becomes an institutional archive once again, documented by we researchers, our videos and photographs deposited at the British Library as a supplement to the existing archive. The interface is a common feature: the archive can only speak through interfaces, whether paper or pixel; the transmission of game or rhyme from one child to another is an interface between memory and performance; and the effort to build bridges between the archive and today’s audiences, and between generations caught up in the histories of play, requires other kinds of interface, other forms of mediation at the boundary. The circuit can be represented as a diagram (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 The Circuit of Play. © Andrew Burn.

Figure 1.2 suggests three main dynamic processes – archive, interface, repertoire – around which the functions of games and play as living culture and as repository in institutions of cultural memory revolve. It also suggests how, within this cycle, the performance of play, both as archive and as lived culture, depends on and produces the dimensions of play in space and time, the legacy of play in cultural memory, and the transmission of games across generations, social groups and geographies.

The remainder of this chapter will take each of the three primary nodes in turn.

The archive

We have described our work with the British Library sound archive in an earlier book (Burn and Richards, 2014). The project which occupies the bulk of the present book engaged with the manuscript collection at the Bodleian, and was centrally concerned with the relationship between play repertoires and the archive. The Bodleian archive forms the focus of Chapters 2 and 8 of this book, which interrogate, respectively, what the letters in the archive reveal about the Opies' relationships with their correspondents, and how children's testimonies display geographies of play.

In many ways, the nature of the archive is at odds with the nature of play as a cultural and social practice. From the child's point of view, play is a thing of the moment: cheeky, witty, subversive, antagonistic to the strictures of adult systems, whether of the curriculum or the archive. As the chapters of this book will show, play is intensely responsive to its own cultural moment, to the tropes of 'old media', but also those of 'new media': the micro-narratives of YouTube, the combat systems and dance moves of videogames, the technocultural ecology of smartphones. It is responsive to the rich media landscapes of film and videogame narratives, the agile cultural exchange of social media, the cultural capital of expert gamers and online influencers.

Despite this, the value of the archive is its reminder that the words, actions, tunes, myth-making, superstition and ritual of twenty-first-century playground games are also folkloric echoes of the play of previous generations, fragments of cultural memory, rehearsals of older ludic practices. Our games exist as a palimpsest, a fresh document on the surface, but one which the ghostly layers and landscapes of yesterday's play show through, sometimes indistinctly, sometimes in sharper relief.

The metaphor of the palimpsest has appeared many times in our work, and will feature in chapters of this book, in particular in [Chapter 9](#), where Marsh and Bishop trace the evolution of play practices over many years on one particular site.

How, then, might this value, the value of the Opie manuscript archive, be realised in the digital age? How do these manuscripts, these imprints of children's inky writing from the 1950s and '60s, function as a repository for memories of play from that time? What echoes of the past might they produce if they could be made to speak? What would these fragments mean to people of the generation whose memories they represent? What would they mean to the children of today?

As we have pondered these questions, the relationship between memory and the archive has often seemed ambiguous. Any assumptions about a straightforward preservation of cultural memory are bedevilled from the outset by Derrida's famous argument that the archive is instituted at the point where memory breaks down: in becoming a substitute for the continuous, orally transmitted cultural memory, it threatens to displace this process (Derrida, [1995](#)). Indeed, there is something odd about employing the weighty fixity of writing and the material boxes, lists and catalogues of the archive to preserve a culture whose characteristic qualities appear to be mutability, ephemerality and, as the great theorists of play often remind us, frivolity.

Nevertheless, the Opies themselves observed in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* that the child folklore they took so seriously had always escaped the archival process, though it is unclear whether they refer to the literal archive or more generally to the process of adult memory:

the everyday games have usually been overlooked. And the verbal lore ... which meant so much in the life of a ten-year-old at the time, [has] been too ordinary to be filed in memory's archive.

(Opie and Opie, [1959](#): vii)

We may assume that the Opies' motivation to deposit the manuscript and sound collections is in part a restoration of this omission they noted in 1959. If this did result, inescapably, in a freezing in time of those archives, then our own motivation to find ways to amplify what Bannister et al. describe in [Chapter 2](#) as this 'multi-vocal archive', and restore its performative qualities, can be seen as part of the characteristic

paradox of the archive, the restless tug-of-war between the inanimate deposited object and the vital ephemeral act.

But the Opies' prompt to consider the archive more generally as a process of memory takes us into further ambiguities. Play is perceived by different generations forgetfully. Children are notoriously amnesiac about the histories of the games they play, often claiming they just made them up when the hapless researchers are only too aware of their long histories, as we have often noticed, and as the Opies observed before us. The risk with the Opie generation – those children of the 1950s and '60s, now in their sixties and seventies – is the reverse. It is a kind of forgetting of the future, an anxiety that the games they played have died out and that children's play is entirely confined to screens in bedrooms. One part of our project, then, conducted by the team in Sheffield and described in [Chapter 10](#), was to bring the 'Opie generation' into conversation with primary school children to talk about their games. It records the discovery by the children that many of 'their' games were played by their grandparents' generation; and by the older participants that many of the games they remember from long ago still flourish on today's playgrounds. 'Memory's archive', then, if partial and hesitant, seems to connect across generations, given a helping hand.

From archive to repertoire

However, if the spoken discourse of the children can appear amnesiac, a different kind of memory is at work in their rehearsal of games and songs, rhymes and rituals: an embodied memory in which their repertoires of play function as the living archive which resolves the ambiguities we have noted. It both preserves and performs, repeats and revises, conserves and converts. It is at once tradition and novelty. Furthermore, in the texture, events and progression of the research process – in our conversations with the children, in their repeat performances for our cameras and microphones, and in the successive phases of editing, presenting, depositing – their living, embodied repertoires return once again to the archive. In both projects, selections from our video collections are deposited with the British Library.

Examples from both projects are provided in [Chapter 4](#), which demonstrates how 'memorates' in the form of belief legends about toilet ghosts and other deliciously liminal entities form a sub-section of children's play repertoires, recalling the forms of heterotopian play we

noted in the first project, drawing on Foucault's account of liminal spaces (Burn and Richards, 2014; Foucault, 1984).

As an example of a different kind of repertoire, here is a clapping game collected during *Playing the Archive* (on 14 June 2018) in a London primary school playground:

My boyfriend gave me an apple
My boyfriend gave me a pear
My boyfriend gave me a kiss on the lips
And threw me down the stairs.
I gave him back his apple
I gave him back his pear
I gave him back his kiss on the lips
And threw him down the stairs.
I threw him over England
I threw him over France
I threw him over the cobbled bridge
and did a little dance.

The girl who performed it said she had learned it from a friend, so could not have known its provenance and reach. She could not know that 10 years earlier a number of close variations were collected in a sister project in Australia (Darian-Smith and Pascoe, 2012); that versions appear on TikTok at the time of writing; that the rhyme appears in various forms as a subset of 'Pretty Little Dutch Girl' (e.g. Roud, 2010: 402); and appeared in *The Singing Game* (Opie and Opie, 1985: 450–2), where Iona Opie notes its arrival from the United States in 1959. The girl who gave us this game could know none of these sources (except perhaps the TikTok one), yet her performance, in voice and action, of the words and the associated 'horizontal clap' (Opie and Opie, 1985: 453) enact the embodied archive, the living archive in which a mute yet active history meets the performative repertoire of play. She speaks the words in a chant, rather than singing them. Once again, this is an embodiment of the living archive: Iona Opie notes that many of the clapping games 'are clapped to the same monotonous drone as "I Am a Pretty Little Dutch Girl"'; though often the girls do not even pretend to sing: "It's alright if they're just said" (Opie and Opie, 1985: 446).

The 'little dance' in this girl's version seems to be a new addition. Iona Opie repeatedly emphasises the complementary characteristics of continuity and change in this oral tradition, and the infectious nature of the process:

It ['My Pretty Little Dutch Girl'] was too exciting a game to keep to oneself. But oral tradition, under pressure, could not preserve the unfamiliar words, which diversified charmingly.

(Opie and Opie, 1985: 452)

This may be one motive, though other forms of inventiveness have led, more transgressively, to references to underpants, no underpants and even coloured underpants in various versions. Indeed, Iona Opie found a riskier version than the one published in *The Singing Game*, this time without the 'Pretty Little Dutch Girl' preliminary section, beginning, like the one we have cited here, with 'My Boyfriend Gave Me an Apple'. It is contained not in her publications, but in her field recordings, which the British Library digitised as part of our previous project, where it forms part of a recording made at a primary school in Birmingham in 1975. This version concludes:

My Boyfriend sent me a kick up the arse
And threw me down the stairs.

(British Library, Opie Collection of Children's Games
and Songs, Shelfmark C898/49)

This living, embodied archive, then, cannot help but innovate. Other examples found in the ethnographic studies of our project found examples of clapping rhymes which echoed familiar patterns, such as the 'Lemonade, Crunchy Ice' pattern, a 2009 London version of which is cited by Steve Roud (2010: 325–6), and which we found in a London playground in our earlier project (2009–11).

As in our ethnographies, the recording provides the material sense of the living performance and its use of multimodal resources: the sound and pace of the clapping, the children's voices, the laughter which punctuates the event, and the tune: these girls sang the tune which Iona Opie notes in *The Singing Game*, a variant of that used for a number of other clapping games (Opie and Opie, 1985: 450).

The twentieth-century technology of sound recording, then, though Iona Opie had no way to publish it, finds its way into the archive as an impression of the multimodal performativity of the play repertoire. The video recordings which we made in the previous project added further impressions of the wider multimodal ensemble – movement, dance, rhythm, place, dress – as well as a wealth of contextual information. These are now archived at the British Library also.

Something of this layered, evolving, contrary relationship between archive and living repertoire is captured in Diana Taylor's study of the relationship between the archive and repertoires of performance in the Americas, which asks how we can consider performance in historical terms when the archive cannot capture the ephemerality of the live event (Taylor, 2003). This difficult relationship is central to our project, and to related studies, not least those of the Opies.

Taylor distinguishes, however, between the performance repertoire, which she associates with the methodologies of the dramaturgical turn in anthropology, and the linguistic aspects of play, which she associates with linguistic methodologies such as discourse analysis. We would contest this distinction, since, for us, the discourse of language is only one of many discursive modes, and we would treat the functions of signification performed by the body (action, gesture, facial expression), and indeed those inscribed in the wider context (e.g. the built environment), within the same multimodal framework.

Multimodal ethnography: the wider picture

The ethnographic process, then, captures the communicative modes of human culture which the print archive alone – or indeed the sound archive – cannot manage. The progression from the living repertoire back to the archive captures whatever semiotic modes are susceptible to the recording apparatus, and deposits them in the archival base. The modes – words, music, action and other semiotic dispositions in space and time – are transformed into media texts, in some cases multimedia texts. The attention of the ethnographer is, as Dicks et al. argue (2006: 7), drawn towards the multimodal complexity of embodied performance. Separate media push the ethnographic gaze towards specific modes; in the Opies' case, this is primarily towards language, though Iona Opie is diligent, in *The Singing Game*, in transcribing game movements.

However, as Dicks et al. observe, an important feature of multimodal ethnography is its ability to preserve the embeddedness of cultural and communicative events in their context: in the case of our projects, in the brick and tarmac, grass and gravel, hidey-hole, climbing frame and pirate ship of the playground.

The accounts provided in this book by members of the project team provide detailed evidence of the ways in which we need to consider children's play in this wider context. They show how the spatial dispositions of play indicate social interest and agency, how different vantage

points and points of view of the ethnographic gaze reveal (and of course construct) the nature of landscapes of play, and how these narratives might be differently constructed from a child's-eye point of view, both literally (through a head or chest cam) and methodologically, with children as co-researchers.

However, they also consider how today's play is markedly different from the period documented by the Opies in the way it draws not only on the media cultures which the Opies noted – advertising, film, television, radio, pop music – but also on the distinctive nature of digital media. This includes different kinds of resource, which range from the cultural practices gathered up in technologies such as smartphones to the social media which provide models, instruction manuals and exemplar material for games of various kinds. In our previous project, Julia Bishop noted how girls were already learning clapping games from YouTube (Bishop, 2014), and we also noted other kinds of resource from YouTube which featured in the choreography of playground dance (Bishop and Burn, 2013), and the use of YouTube films of videogame walkthroughs (Burn, 2013). A specifically multimodal ethnography, in these instances, drew attention to communicative and expressive modes beyond language: choreographed movement, the haptic exchanges of clapping games, the proxemics of bodies in space, and the music which Iona Opie focuses on in *The Singing Game* and which Marsh analyses in *The Musical Playground* (Marsh, 2009).

We made the further point in *Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age* that, unlike all the other media on which children draw, however playful they may be, videogames are distinctive in actually being games. We noted how children would bring the scenarios and landscapes of blockbuster game franchises to their minds to serve as invisible backdrops to their physical re-enactments of videogame narratives on the playground. Once again, the palimpsest came to mind as an apt image for these layers of play, exported from the digital to the physical realm, invisible in many respects to all but the children involved in them (Burn, 2013).

In that earlier project, the favourite game on which to draw was *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2007). In the project which occupies the bulk of this book, the favourite was undoubtedly *Fortnite* (Epic Games/Epic Games, 2017), though other games featured, in particular *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios/Mojang Studios, 2011) and *Roblox* (Roblox/Roblox, 2006). In the case of *Fortnite*, most of what we observed was the performance of the dance routines that the game represents in digital form.

In the case of the games, a multimodal ethnography again drew attention to a range of expressive modes employed by the children: dramatised movement and language, the disposition of bodies in space, the interaction between these modes and the built environment. However, games employ other modes rooted in the coded nature of their design and the game engines on which they were constructed. These modes are described as procedural in multimodal accounts of videogames (Hawreliak, 2018; Burn, 2021). Janet Murray includes procedurality in the four kinds of affordance she proposes in relation to digital environments (though, as we see in [Chapter 8](#), they also apply to physical environments):

- procedural (composed of executable rules)
- participatory (inviting human action and manipulation of the represented world)
- encyclopaedic (containing very high capacity of information in multiple media formats)
- spatial (navigable as an information repository and/or a virtual place)

(Murray, 2011: 51–86)

These specify a range of affordances on which children draw when playing: the procedural rule sets which permit combat, contest, progression and development, and win/lose states in the game; the participation both in the digital environment and in the social aspects of multiplayer games; the wealth of visual, auditory and other information in the game; and the spatial affordances of richly designed digital landscapes. All these affordances are adapted in some way by the children as they transfer the games from console to playground – though some aspects of them exist only in the children’s minds. The bare tarmac of the playground loses the visual complexity and naturalistic (or fantasy) modalities of its digital origins, yet these are maintained through imaginative effort by the children, laid like an invisible palimpsest over the playground surface.

Meanwhile, other chapters in the present book consider play across time: how practices of play and the games embedded within them exemplify both continuity and change in the case of one primary school playground over 10 years or so. As with the archive, these layered forms of play and game survive in ghostly form beneath the current landscape: both in memory, and in totemic objects distributed across this playscape. These are conceived, in [Chapter 9](#) by Jackie Marsh, as meshwork,

wayfaring trails along which life is lived (drawing on Lefebvre, 1991); and, once again, as palimpsests, traces of earlier play below the surface of the contemporary space.

In all these contexts, a multimodal ethnographic approach extends the possibilities available to the Opies, to move beyond the recording and analysis of language, music and movement, to considering a wider landscape of ludic modality: how the action, poetry, song, dance and even procedural rule sets of play ebb and flow in the repertoire.

From archive to interface

The archive presupposes technology, initially the most basic (and, as we are discovering, durable) technology of writing, in the form of the hypomnemata which anticipated archival storage and its memory function, as Foucault succinctly described:

The hypomnemata constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation.

(Foucault, 1998: 273)

From this first moment, the technology stands for, acts as substitute for and then reiterates the originary event. In this sense it is from the outset virtual, in the sense of opposition to a supposed reality, and in the sense of reduction from that reality, a diminution, what we would recognise as a specifically multimodal reduction, omitting the semiotic modes which exceed written language. It functions as the phenomenon which Derrida termed ‘the trace’, the repeatable re-presentation which paradoxically contains the past event yet in which that event is no longer present (Derrida, 1973).

As we have seen, the Opie Archive exhibits precisely this quality; yet we might observe the power of the material objects, which reach beyond the lexicogrammar of the linguistic system, to recall something of the immediacy of the past voices, textures, landscapes of play which they record, albeit through a reduction of modes.

However, the nature of the virtuality is also to signal potential: Derrida’s argument is that the trace contains not only the no-longer-present event, but the potential future events implied by repetition, also not-present. So, as our team opened the boxes of the Opie manuscript archive in the Bodleian, the traces of those games from the 1950s and

'60s were repeated – though iterated is a better word, since it suggests progress and transformation. To open those boxes in 2019 was to read and understand them differently. For our young participants, to open simulations of those boxes and play the games in their own playgrounds was to carry this iteration into performance and repertoire.

The Derridean 'trace', then, suggests the role of the archive as itself an interface: a technology which provides access for one social group to a set of representations created by another. More accurately, the interface in relation to the archive is the set of apparatuses which act as a boundary between the content of the archive and its potential audiences. A central rationale for our project was to provide what was obviously lacking: a catalogue, a portal, through which the audience might access, visit, interrogate the Opie collection, and through which those ghostly voices from the past might speak. A further objective was to design other forms of access, other interfaces, moving beyond the familiar screen into more immersive technologies typically characterised by problematising 'reality': virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed or merged reality.

Before we consider these, we might retrace our steps. Although our clear objective was to create interfaces where there were none, in order to access the Opie Archive, is it true that no interfaces existed at all? This depends on definitions of interface, which range from those strictly confined to computing, requiring (in our project at least) interaction between a computing system and a user via a mediating boundary such as a graphical user interface. This stricter definition does indeed apply to the portals and tools we designed during the project. However, the broader concept of an interface suggests any mediating boundary between some kind of content (and the authorial impetus behind it), and an audience. Galloway (2008), for example, suggests analogies with classical Greek poetry, in which the poet acts as a mediating boundary between the Muse and the audience. He goes on to argue that the interface moves the act of representation from a state of transparency to a state of refraction: he quotes the French philosopher François Dagoguet to propose that 'the interface is not simple and transparent but a "fertile nexus"' (Galloway, 2008: 938).

His argument is pertinent to our project in many ways: he characterises the interface as liminal, layered and generative; he locates it within an ecology of play, which he terms 'ludic capitalism'; he even perceives it as a palimpsest, with the proviso that the layers of the palimpsest are forms of data that can be interpreted.

How exactly, though, might this apply to our project, and to the cycle of manifestations which we have visited, from the archive to the

repertoire, from captured memory to ephemeral performance, from document box to playground, from written page to digital avatar, and from the Opies' moment to our own?

The impetus to archive is there from the beginning of the Opies' project: as we have seen, they lament the loss to 'memory's archive' of the material of childlore. Their survey (itself a kind of interface, proposing, requesting, seeking, prompting, needing a response) provokes the initial commitment to archive. The children's writings serve as the first instances of hypomnemata, codifying their play as written language, occasionally with drawings and diagrams; transcoding the abundant modes of play (action, speech, music song, rhythm, proxemics, haptic contact) into these restricted forms of lexicographic representation. This process can also be described as transduction (Kress, 2000: 159), in which semiotic forms are moved from one mode to another, in this case in a reductive manner. Above all, however, it is not the play itself that is captured, but the child's re-presentation of it. Already, then, this is not only an archive but an interface. Those ghostly voices provide a glimpse into the even more ghostly streets and playgrounds of 1950s and '60s Newcastle, Aberdeen, Hampshire, Cardiff, London. The writing is indeed a layer of the palimpsest, though it is hard to see how we can interrogate the layer beyond it, unless through historical method, which indeed the Opies themselves apply in their research.

The correspondence between the children and the Opies – the 'epistolary relationship', as Bannister et al. describe it in [Chapter 2](#) – produced further layers. Sometimes these were mediated by teachers, sometimes they were more direct – as in this case of a child who writes to promise examples of games and rhymes, receives a letter with further requests (and cigarette cards!) from the Opies and provides more examples ([Figures 1.3a–d](#)).

The cigarette cards are a telling reminder that this 'interface', while it may be serious research, is also playful. At the same time, the child's claim to validity as a direct link to children's games prefigures the experiences we have had in recruiting children as co-researchers in our projects.

So in certain ways, the archive itself, and more importantly, the human interactions which constitute it, generate fledgling forms of interface, suggesting how the representations of play may be interrogated, extended, configured, even categorised. One school decides, for example, that it'll make a book of rhymes for the Opies ([Figures 1.4a–b](#)), producing a subset of their play, and arranging its contents in relation to topics such as rain, counting-out rhymes and ring games.

17

6-11-51

Std III
Chirton St Josephs
School
Wallsend Rd.
North Shields
Northumberland

Dear Sir and Madam

Our teacher read to us a letter which was in the Sunday Times. It was about the book you are writing. We wish to help you in your task. Our class are going to send as many rhymes and verses as we can. It will be easy for ~~send~~ us to find ~~some~~ rhymes because we are school children our selves. We hope our rhymes will please you and help you to make your book a success.

Yours Truly

Figure 1.3a Figures 1.3a-d: letters to the Opies from a pupil in Standard III at Chirton St Joseph's School, North Shields, 6 November 1951 and 9 June 1952. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fols 17r, 20r-21r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

1

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20

Std III
Chirton St. Josephs,
Wallsend Road,
Chirton,
North Shields,
Northumberland.
9-6-52

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Opie,

Thank-
you very much for your
very nice letter and cig-
grette cards you sent me.
I am sending this letter
in answer to the questions
you sent me. I regret to say
that we have not answer
to the last question but

Figure 1.3b

²
I hope my other answers
please you.
About the game of kigo.
Kigo is a very new game
and it is like king. You
all join together in a circle
with your feet wide apart
A person bounces a ball
in the centre of the circle
and lets the ball go
through a persons legs.
Then that person bounces
the ball three times and
~~and~~ tries to tig someone
with the ball. When he
catches someone they pass
the ball to each other
and catch someone else.

Figure 1.3c

³
About the game of poison.
To play poison the person
who is on stands with
his arms out and his fingers
wide apart. The people who
are playing catch hold
of one of his fingers and
wait till he says poison
and they all run off until
they are all caught.
Yours sincerely

Figure 1.3d

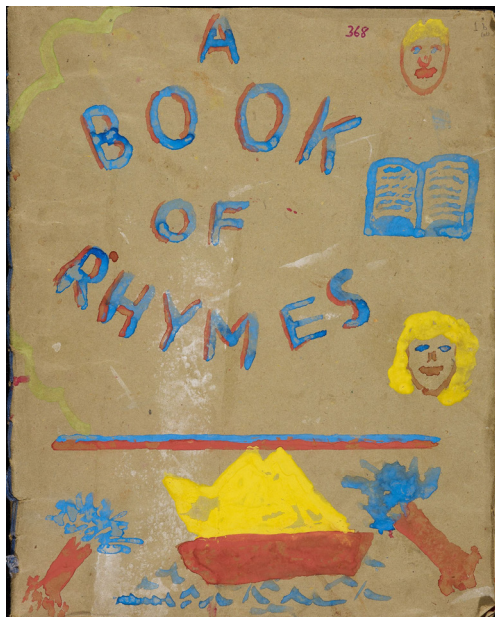


Figure 1.4a Figures a-b: cover and title page of a 'Book of Rhymes' by pupils at Chirton St Joseph's School, North Shields, 1951-2. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fols 1b r-2r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

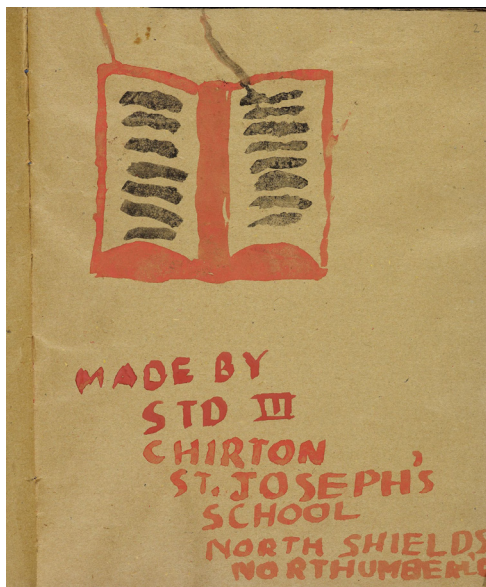


Figure 1.4b

If we shift focus from the Opie Archive to the repertoire in the contemporary playgrounds we have studied, what further layers of the interface between play archive and play repertoire become evident? Some of these are provided by social media, and we have documented instances in this project and the previous ones of children finding on YouTube not only suitable content to be adapted for play, such as Michael Jackson dance routines (Bishop and Burn, 2013), but direct examples of games they can learn and relocate to their own context, such as hand-clapping games (Bishop, 2014). In this case, YouTube provides a searchable interface and portal to what is certainly an informal archive of play in a bewildering variety of forms.

Videogame: interface, repertoire, archive

A particular cluster of examples provide insights into a distinctive form of play dependent on computer interfaces: videogame-related play. As noted above, in the previous project we documented examples of children's playground play which re-enacted scenarios from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2009). In that case, while the user interface of the game may have provided the initial access to ludic landscapes, characters and narratives, something rather different was happening on the playground. If these aspects of the videogame may be regarded as 'the archive', they were reanimated in the dramatic action, mime, gesture, spoken language and shared knowledge of the children, who employ no other resources than the tarmac and grass of the playground, overlaid with the invisible layer of the visual gameworld in their minds. This multimodal, ludic performativity is well established in relation to the dramatic landscapes of digital games themselves (Burn, 2021); but what happens when it exceeds the digital game, transported to the physical playground? Has the interface disappeared in this instance? Or does the playground itself, with its built affordances, function as a kind of interface for all the kinds of play it contains?

In *Playing the Archive* we found many examples of similar transpositions of videogame play into the playground (Potter, Cowan and Signorelli use the term 'laminated' in Chapters 5 and 6), though this time centring on games such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox*. A group of children in Cardiff showed us the performance of dance routines learned from *Fortnite*: the shift from the game's interface, with its animated dancing characters, to the appropriation of these moves by children, the digital repertoire re-enacted through their bodies, their

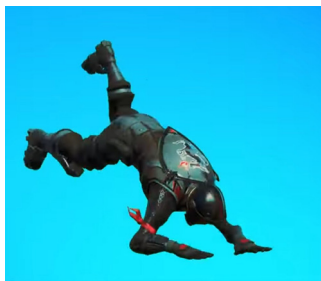


Figure 1.5a ‘The Worm’ dance in *Fortnite*. Portions of the materials used are trademarks and/or copyrighted works of Epic Games, Inc. All rights reserved by Epic. This material is not official and is not endorsed by Epic.



Figure 1.5b ‘The Worm’ dance in *Fortnite* performed by children from Ysgol Treganna, Cardiff. © Andrew Burn.

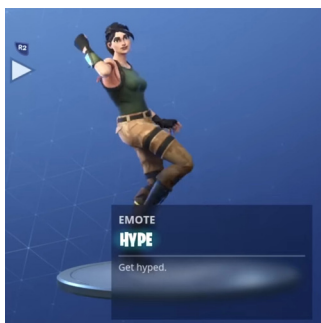


Figure 1.5c ‘The Hype’ dance in *Fortnite*. Portions of the materials used are trademarks and/or copyrighted works of Epic Games, Inc. All rights reserved by Epic. This material is not official and is not endorsed by Epic.

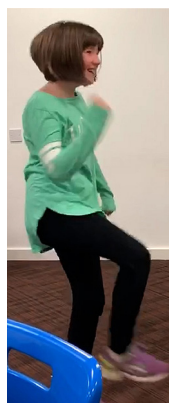


Figure 1.5d ‘The Hype’ dance in *Fortnite* performed by a child from Ysgol Treganna, Cardiff. Informed consent for use of this image was provided by both parent and child. © Andrew Burn.

interactions, their deployment of physical spaces in playground and classroom (Figures 1.5a–d).

In a reversal of this trajectory, Valerio Signorelli from the Centre for Advanced Spatial analysis team experimented with motion capture of children performing ‘The Floss’ dance from *Fortnite*, mapping the captured movements onto a digital body (Figure 1.6). The aim was to attempt an interface in which children’s play movements could be

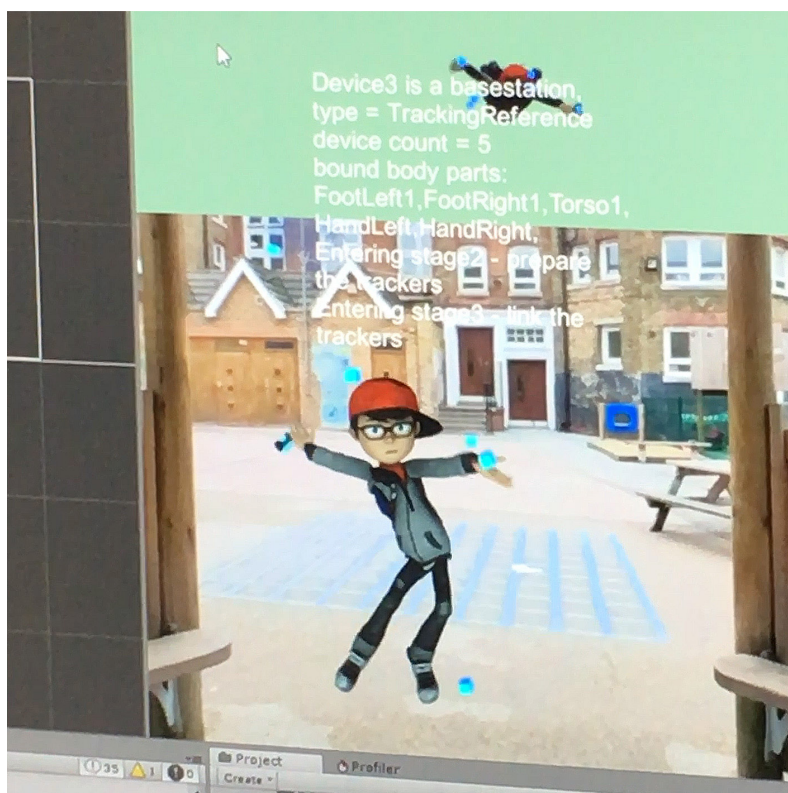


Figure 1.6 Motion capture of child's 'The Floss' dance performed by a London primary school pupil, mapped onto a digital child avatar. © Valerio Signorelli, 2018.

captured in real time and then replayed, so that physical play, from clapping games to dance routines, could be played 'with' or 'against' the computer: the game in the machine.

The project's focus on the Opie Archive was centrally represented in the work of the mixed-reality team, in the form of prototypes in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) which employed a digital child figure to present selections from the archive in audio, image and video formats to the enquiring user. Their work is presented in more detail in [Chapter 7](#).

In the event, motion capture and VR interfaces proved difficult to manage in the context of museums and galleries, in particular our main partner, the Museum of Childhood, now renamed the Young V&A. While these more novel approaches can be seen as vulnerable to perennial adult fears about the risks of new technologies, it is more likely that

for this museum the problems were largely practical: how to manage awkward VR headsets, cables and staff training.

In a change of tack, we considered the historical nature of the project, how it reached back over a century of play, the material culture evoked by this, the nostalgic colouring provoked by any such work. The eventual solution was an interface from the mid-twentieth century: a dial phone set in a red telephone box. Users were able to 'phone the past', dialling numbers from a directory to hear children's voices presenting games from the Opie Archive.

Once again, Galloway's notion of the interface as refraction rather than transparent representation is pertinent here. While these samples from the Opie Archive may appear transparent representations to the user, they are better characterised by Dagognet's 'fertile nexus', which Galloway cites. The words are indeed 'lifted' from the writings of the children in the archive, though transduced (Kress, 2010) from the mode of written language to the mode of speech. Whose speech? The voices are those of children we recruited from across the UK to represent some of the extraordinary regional variety of the Opies' work: children from London, Sheffield, Aberdeen, Cardiff. This nexus, then, combines the ghostly voices of children from 70 years ago with the lively spoken performance of their heirs, and the analogue mechanics and nostalgic housing of the red phone box with the digital database of recordings in a Raspberry Pi.

The final interface solution we arrived at was a similar confection of old and new. It consisted of a set of playing cards, each with a written description of a game selected from the Opie Archive, with an injunction to users to play the game. The card also displayed a QR code taking the user to an animated digital child who would guide the user through the game. Once again, the transparent mediating figure is that of the child, while the refraction is constructed by adult interpretation and transformation of the archive. In the case of this interface, the archive is offered once again to the players of today, to be received again into the repertoire, a process we observed in the use of the cards at the Young V&A in the Festival of Play co-curated with the museum as part of the project.

Conclusion: a short century of play

Across the wider project, then, the general pattern of our research threw up, time and again, the complex cyclical relationship between archive

and repertoire, mediated by interfaces which varied from inky sheets of paper in dusty boxes to the digital catalogue, from '70s telephone sets to the encoded affordances of mixed reality. In all of this, the team shared a strong sense of the living repertoires whispered by the archive, of the vital intent to preserve these in the Opies' archival effort, and of the value of coaxing their archive into the consciousness, practice, space and time of today's young players, and the living archive their play represents. At the same time, we became increasingly aware of the ways in which our research, in the footsteps of the Opies, laid the ground for the continuation of the archive: the recording of hundreds of instances of play, its refraction through theory and analysis, its eventual deposit in the British Library, to add to the video deposits we made 10 years previously.

Finally, we shared a strong sense of the ways in which the archive, while highlighting evident continuities in forms and functions of games, also threw into sharp relief the significance of changing context, spaces and social shapings of play. From the bombsites, railway embankments, lamp posts and ginnels of post-war play to the surveilled playgrounds, congested traffic and digital landscapes of today's play, children find their way through the physical and social barricades to the (often unlikely) opportunities their terrain affords. The final chapter of this book looks forward from our project to the work of a successor project, the Play Observatory, which documents the latest chapter in this history: children's ingenious management of the extraordinary constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdowns. From those landscapes of the 1950s, with memories of the recent global war imprinted in them, to those of the 2020s, overlaid by the imagery of global pandemic, our projects have tapped into what, borrowing from Hobsbawm's historical image (1994), we might characterise as a short century of play. The Opies began it with a reference to the dawn of a new Elizabethan age. We note that, if such an age ends with our project, other historical processes, in particular that of play itself, continue to metamorphose and flourish.

Notes

- 1 Playing the Archive was funded by the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council through its Content Creation and Consumption in the Digital Economy programme.
- 2 Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age, 2009–11, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the Beyond Text programme.
- 3 The Opie Archive is a British Academy project, and can be found at: <https://www.opiearchive.org>.

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Part I

The people in the archive

Folklore, friendships and reciprocity: hearing the epistolary relationships in the multi-vocal archive of Iona and Peter Opie

Catherine Bannister, Julia Bishop and Alison Somerset-Ward

The research of the husband-and-wife team Iona and Peter Opie into children's folklore in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century was pioneering in its breadth and scope. While others had collected childhood oral culture before them, especially rhymes and games (Grider, 1995; Marsh and Bishop, 2014), the Opies' decision to undertake a national survey and to collect information as directly as possible from school-aged children, makes their contribution particularly significant. Their findings, gathered over a period of more than 30 years, via correspondence and surveys, and later sound recording and observation, formed the basis of a series of landmark publications on the lore, language and games of young people aged 6–14 (Opie and Opie, 1959; 1969; 1985; 1997; Opie, 1993). Although the Opies' books were written for a general audience, these works became a catalyst for the academic study of children's play and peer cultures, and continue to be a key reference point today (e.g. Roud, 2010; Willett et al., 2013; Burn and Richards, 2014; Bishop and Factor, 2019).

Widely lauded at the time of their publication, particularly the earlier volumes, these studies excited interest among academics. Reviews not only appeared in the national press but also in scholarly journals. Basil Bernstein (1960) and Sheldon L. Messinger (1964), for example, reviewing *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), go to some lengths to show the relevance of the Opies' material to social scientists, and acknowledge the neglect of children's peer culture in

academic studies hitherto (Bernstein, 1960: 181; Messinger, 1964: 131). On the other hand, a recurrent criticism of the Opies' work has been the lack of detailed information about their methods of data collection and specifically that the questionnaires, which played such a large part in their now classic works, were never published. As Messinger observes:

The methods used to collect these materials are not described. Occasional remarks suggest that much collecting was done by others at the behest of the Opies, that sometimes the Opies had children write down the terms they used for various purposes and that direct observation was sometimes used. Some form of interviewing seems to have been used at times, and the Opies give evidence of their sensitivity to the importance of phrasing questions properly.

(1964: 131)

Messinger was right. As Iona Opie reflected many years later, at the end of her long career, which had continued well after Peter's premature death in 1982:

I have often been asked about our methodology. In the days when we were running these rather large surveys, we did not even know the word 'methodology'. We never had any higher education. We had been caught in the war. So when we wanted to know how the children of Bishop Auckland or Ipswich amused themselves in the playground, or spent their free time after school, we just asked their teachers to ask them to write about it. We sent out what I suppose could be called questionnaires, but they were of a very general nature, just general guidance.

(Opie, 2014: 200; see also Bishop, 2014)

The Opies' idiosyncratic working life is more intimately unwrapped through an autobiographical lens in [Chapter 3](#) of this volume. Suffice to say here, as Messinger goes on to point out, that knowing the Opies' approach and details of their data-gathering methods is important when it comes to some of the Opies' generalisations. Messinger gives the example of their discussion of bawdy material in which 'they note that "genuinely erotic verse" is "unusual."' But they elsewhere suggest that much childhood lore is not meant for adult ears, and one wonders, again, about their methods of collection' (1964: 131).

Gershon Legman, a pioneer of the study of sexual and taboo folklore, writing some 15 years later, goes further. He has seen a copy of one of the Opies' questionnaires 'on which the children were to be quizzed by their teachers either orally or in writing', and speculates:

These replies could be expected to be well-expurgated beforehand, of course, both by the intimidated children and by their solicitous schoolteachers, themselves intimidated in turn by being all listed and named geographically on pages xi–xv, though the crucial questionnaire is neither mentioned nor printed at all.

(Legman, 1979: xxix)

Folklorist Georgina Boyes has also raised concerns regarding the role of teachers in the Opies' surveys and the potential for 'censorship' by both children and adults of the information contributed. 'Would all teachers risk their class appearing as the source of "impropriety" in a published work?' she asks, and '[w]ould every child whose repertoire included them hand in vulgar rhymes and obscene jokes to any teacher?' (Boyes, 1990: 202).

With the archival deposit of the Opies' collected materials and working papers by Iona during the 1990s, however, it became possible to explore the couple's approach in detail and to trace the evolution of their methods over the course of their work.¹ The bulk of the Opies' collection is now held by the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Bodleian Libraries, 2021; Bishop, 2013). The first series of this material is predominantly made up of the children's survey responses and accompanying teacher correspondence (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MSS. Opie 1–46), grouped by school and ordered more or less chronologically. The Playing the Archive project enabled the digitisation of these papers, which, beginning in the early 1950s, represent the first concerted phase, and bedrock, of the Opies' research into schoolchildren's folklore and language.

In this chapter we focus on the Archive node in the Circuit of Play described in Chapter 1. We draw on our work to catalogue these materials in detail and make them publicly accessible as a searchable resource, the online Opie Archive (<https://www.opiearchive.org>), hosted by the Digital Humanities Institute at the University of Sheffield. Our insights derive from an initial 23 schools out of the approximately 250 whose contributions are represented in this part of the archive. We therefore focus on the setting up of the Opies' survey and the formulation of the questionnaires, and present a selection of the Opies'

correspondence with the teachers involved. Our aim is to exemplify the nature of the information they gathered and round out the account of the Opies' aims and the early development of their data collection methods, relating them to the research principles the Opies did in fact express in a number of scholarly articles. We argue that this 'multi-vocal archive' has revealed the teachers, as well as their students, as collaborative participants in the Opies' endeavour, illuminating the nature of 'citizen science' in the third quarter of the twentieth century and raising questions as to how the Opies' status as 'researchers beyond the university walls' (Finnegan, 2005) affected their approach, why they adopted the collaborative ethos that they did, and how this affects the nature of their data and its potential for interpretation. Bearing in mind the commentators' observations above, we are now able to address the debate around data bias from a more informed standpoint, equipped with greater understanding as to why some teachers elected to withhold children's contributions and why others chose to share. We suggest that these decisions require interpretation within the context of temporal constructions of literacy, conflicting interpretations of 'knowledge' between the folklorists and educators, and social conventions around childhood, including beliefs concerning children's competences. In other words, what the Opies sought was oral lore – a type of expression and knowledge they valued but not one instilled by teachers in the classroom. As folklorists, the Opies privileged a type of knowledge that teachers were not accustomed to evaluating and placed less significance on formal aspects of children's communication, such as spelling. Indeed, in their responses, children were in some cases setting down rhymes and games never previously put to paper, some containing nonsense words and regional dialect with no standardised orthography (Bishop et al., 2021).

Epistolary relationships in the work of the Opies

In her keynote address to 'The State of Play' conference held at the University of Sheffield in 1998, Iona Opie painted a picture of her life as a researcher with her husband Peter as 'curiously reclusive', yet she indicated that the couple were not without friendship and human contact. Rather, their relationships were conducted for the most part by post (see Bishop, 2014: 214), and these epistolary friendships grew out of their working life as they formed ties with their research correspondents. Such relationships had already characterised the Opies'

earlier research on nursery rhymes, begun in the mid-1940s and culminating in the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (ODNR) in 1951 (Opie and Opie, 1951a; Bishop, 2014). Some of these contacts came about through letters which the Opies published in newspapers, sometimes in response to a reader's query relating to children's rhymes or seeking help themselves from readers on a particular point. The Opies logged this, and all their work-related correspondence, chronologically in what became a series of address books, beginning in 1945. As well as the name and address of the correspondent, they kept notes on what prompted the contact, and the date and content of the letters received and their replies. Each correspondent was also given their own unique number. Books 1 and 2 alone contain 1,280 individual correspondents, covering the period from 1945 to 1960 (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 215).

During their work on the ODNR, the Opies realised that some of the rhymes sent in by their correspondents were likely to be more characteristic of older children's peer culture, an inference partly prompted by the impropriety of some by adult standards, which evidences the scope of their interests even at this formative stage (Opie, 2014: 199). Following the publication of their small volume entitled *I Saw Esau: Traditional rhymes of youth* in 1947, the Opies began to receive further examples, not only from adult correspondents but also from children, from whom it became clear that the rhymes were still current and 'probably being repeated all over the country' (Cott, 1983: 276). By the time ODNR was published in 1951, therefore, the Opies had decided to study this school-aged children's oral culture in contemporary Britain. In a letter to *The Sunday Times* printed on 4 November 1951, after first responding to a reader's query about the song 'Pop Goes the Weasel', they appealed for help with this new venture:

Two years ago when we sought assistance in *The Sunday Times* in completing 'O.D.N.R.,' more than a hundred readers responded. Might we now seek assistance in the even more difficult task of collecting oral lore from schoolchildren? We would be grateful for any accounts of skipping, ball bouncing, or counting-out rhymes, catch rhymes, riddle rhymes or tongue twisters: also popular sayings, nominees, back chat, youthful oaths, and other joys, *seemly or unseemly*, traditional among schoolchildren from seven to fourteen.

(Opie and Opie, 1951b; emphasis added)

The letter led to over 150 replies, such that in a subsequent letter, printed just three weeks later, the Opies reported that there had been ‘an extraordinary response to our appeal for school lore, which is bringing letters from readers aged from eight to eighty’ and promising that they were ‘hoping to reply to each letter individually’ (Opie and Opie, 1951c). A similar appeal also appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) on 30 November 1951, bringing in still more offers of help (Opie and Opie, 1951d).

One of the first of these, dated 6 November, is from a child, who explains:

Our teacher read to us a letter which was in the Sunday Times. It was about the book you are writing. We wish to help you in your task. Our class are going to send as many rhymes and verses as we can. It will be easy for us to find some rhymes because we are school children ourselves. We hope our rhymes will please you and help you to make your book a success.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 17r)

True to his word, the child sent in ‘A Book of Rhymes’ the following April, a scrapbook ‘Made by STD [Standard] III, Chirton St Joseph’s School, North Shields, Northumberland’ (Figure 2.1).

As Iona later recalled, and the Opie address books attest, however, it was teachers who quickly became key players in the collecting effort as it began to develop:

A letter to the Sunday Times, early [sic] in 1951, brought us a vast number of new correspondents: professors, journalists, Mass Observation, folklorists, children and – most important of all – teachers. It was the teachers who built up for us the network of contacts with schools all over Great Britain which enabled us to set up our first survey. They got their own pupils to write answers to the informal questionnaires we supplied, and they put us in touch with teachers they knew (and knew would be interested) in other parts of the country. Through them we were able to ‘interview’, by post, five thousand schoolchildren; and later, for the subsequent books, another ten thousand, and then a further five thousand.

(Opie, 1988: 213)

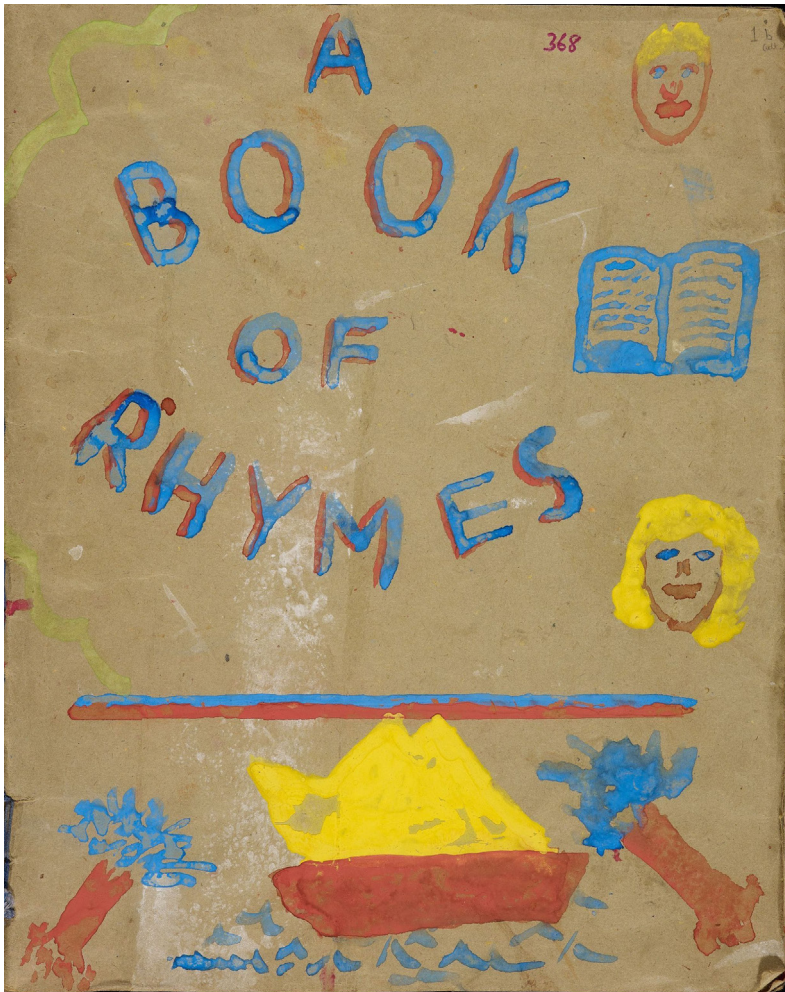


Figure 2.1 Front cover of a scrapbook of rhymes sent in by children at Chirton St Joseph's School, North Shields, England, 1952. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 1r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

It was teacher correspondents, therefore, both in primary and secondary schools, who enabled the Opies' 'modest, unsponsored, and wholly voluntary survey' to blossom into 'the most comprehensive folklore collecting scheme which has yet been undertaken in Britain' (Opie and Opie, 1959: xiii).

Indeed, it seems that the teachers' initial responses to the 1951 newspaper letters may have suggested the possibility of a national survey in the first place or were responsible for the Opies' methodological

progression from general public correspondence to school surveys. It must have become immediately obvious that teachers were well placed to provide rich and extensive contributions from children. On 22 December 1951, within three weeks of the TLS letter, for example, Dr G. G. Urwin, a teacher at Sale County Grammar School for Boys in Cheshire, sent in a collection of 40 rhymes from his students (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 215, correspondent 435). Several weeks later, in the 8 January 1952 entry for Dr J. A. Russell, headmaster of a school in Kirkcudbrightshire, Peter notes that ‘we now send one outline and letter’ (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 215, correspondent 478). A week later, he mentions sending ‘a typescript questionnaire [relating to] boys’ school lore’ to Urwin, followed soon after by a ‘supplement’ and an ‘outline’. These would appear to be early drafts of the Opies’ initial questionnaires. By the autumn of 1952, Mrs E. Bertha Walton, whose husband was a teacher at Spennymoor Grammar Technical School in County Durham, and who herself contacted numerous schools in the area on behalf of the Opies, is noted as having been sent ‘nine supps [supplements] and 5 1st Qs [questionnaires]’ (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 215, correspondent 492). Thus, the questionnaires were developed specifically for use by teachers in schools, and it is these questionnaires, together with an array of more customised question lists, which formed the prompts for most of the children’s contributions in series 1 of the Opie collection. In the next section we provide a brief overview of the questionnaires, particularly the first two, and the Opies’ instructions for administering them, before turning to the way in which teachers and children engaged with them and the collecting process, the relationships that developed and the Opies’ research ethos.

Interviewing by post: from questionnaire to ‘suggestionnaire’

The Opie Archive contains four principal questionnaires plus a series of additional questionnaires (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS Opie 46 fols 1–46). Despite the same or similar titles, the four main questionnaires are distinct from each other but have points of overlap in terms of the genres and topics of interest they cover, and in terms of the Opies’ outline of their research and instructions. Pencil annotations on some of the questionnaires,

and a note by Iona preceding them in the archive, identify them respectively as Questionnaires I, II, III and IV, while Iona's note describes the additional ones as 'lists of further questions, for schools willing to contribute more material, and specific enquiries' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 1r). The four main questionnaires are undated but, on the basis of our work to match the responses with the questions in the process of cataloguing, and with the help of the address books and teacher correspondence, we believe them to cover the period from early 1952 to 1960.

Each questionnaire comes with a preamble addressed to the teacher, indicating the range of genres the Opies are interested in and suggesting ways of gathering the responses. They give two options for the latter: either from a class orally, with the teacher asking children for contributions and noting down the answers themselves, or in writing, with the teacher asking the students to write down what they know. They commend the oral method as particularly conducive for short items, allowing the teacher to probe the children's answers, and the children's spoken responses themselves to potentially prompt information from others in the group. The written method is more suitable for rhymes and games, although it is more laborious. The Opies comment that 'both methods have produced good results', suggesting that they have already had some feedback on them from teacher correspondents.

Apart from children putting their name and age at the top of their answers, the Opies urge, '[i]deally, thereafter, the children should be free to write what they like', that 'spelling is not important, and that, although we would like as many rhymes as possible, it is better to write down just two or three rhymes and describe them fully, than to list a large number without saying what they are for'. This includes 'the accompanying actions, when and where played, and, if they like, when learnt, for whom, and whether or not the game is a favourite'. It is not just the items the Opies are interested in but their dynamics, namely their 'transmission, distribution, age, origins and implications to the child himself [sic]'. Finally, the Opies ask the teachers for 'any personal observations' which may assist the study.

As already noted, the first questionnaire seems to have crystallised into its more or less standard form in early 1952 (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fols 2r–6r). Entitled 'The Oral Lore of School Children [Questionnaire I]', it consisted of five pages, two devoted to the preamble (Figure 2.2) and three containing the questions themselves, under the headings 'Rhymes and Games' and 'Words and Sayings' (Figure 2.3).

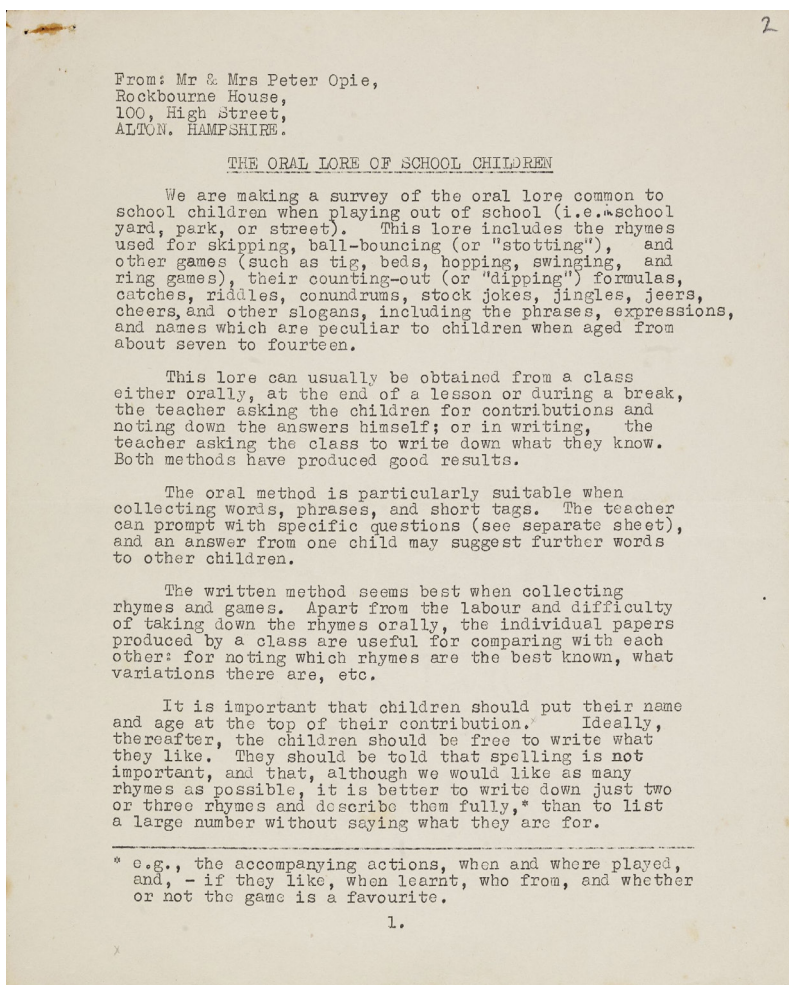


Figure 2.2 'The Oral Lore of School Children [Questionnaire I]', preamble. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fols 2r-3r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

The list of genres provided by the Opies in the first questionnaire is similar to that published in *The Sunday Times*, emphasising verbal forms, language play and children's lexicon, though the description of associated games and actions is also encouraged. Notably, the words 'seemly and unseemly', used in *The Sunday Times* letter, are absent from the school questionnaires, perhaps in recognition of the fact that 'unseemly' items could create tension between the students and the teachers in this collecting context. There is also reference to the spatial

2.

There is no need for the children's contributions to be corrected or collated before they are sent. If, however, the papers are gone through, any comments on the contributions, or annotations on particular rhymes ("very popular here" or "I remember this in my youth, c 1910"), will be much appreciated!

It may be noted that we are not merely making a collection of oral lore, but studying its transmission, distribution, age, origins and implications to the child himself. Any personal observations which may assist this study are very welcome. The traditional lore of school children is a subject which has received peculiarly little attention despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it flourishes throughout the country and forms an integral part of the lives of many or most boys and girls up to about fourteen. On the attached sheets are some questions under which the lore may be divided. The questions under the headings are not given for solemn systematic answering, but are intended to be merely suggestions to assist collecting, and show the ground being covered.

We should also, perhaps, emphasise that it is as interesting to us when a school or locality reports that only little oral lore exists as when it is extensive; and that for purposes of study the twenty-fifth recording of a rhyme or saying may be as useful as its first recording.

IONA & PETER OPIE

Figure 2.2 continued

and temporal contexts of play and games, and children's customs and beliefs.

It was not long before they produced a second questionnaire, responding to the information that was coming in and expanding their suggestions to follow up on these. 'The Oral Lore of School Children - [Questionnaire] II' (Figure 2.4) is characterised by the Opies as 'a supplement to our first questionnaire' and, based on the address book evidence noted above, appears to have been in use by September 1952. The preamble highlights the plethora of examples they had received, including older items thought to be obsolete, rhymes and expressions

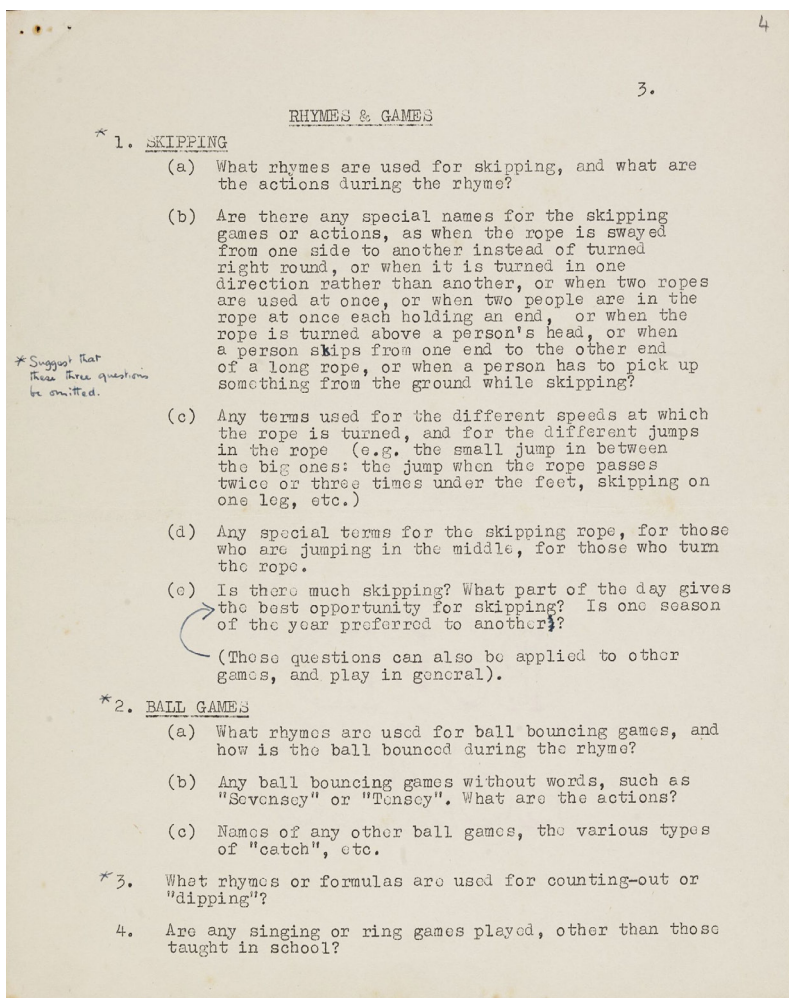


Figure 2.3 'The Oral Lore of School Children [Questionnaire II]', questions. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fols 4r-6r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

'of post-war invention (mentioning pre-fabs, nylons, flying saucers, the Skylon, etc.)', and additional subjects brought up by the children which 'when the teachers concerned were so good as to inquire further on the points raised, [revealed] fresh fields of custom and belief'. Accordingly, the questions are now grouped under the headings of 'Games', 'Customs and Beliefs' and 'Words and Sayings'. Rather than naming specific games or genres, they focus on features, qualities, and temporal, spatial, material and bodily elements associated with them, such as strength,

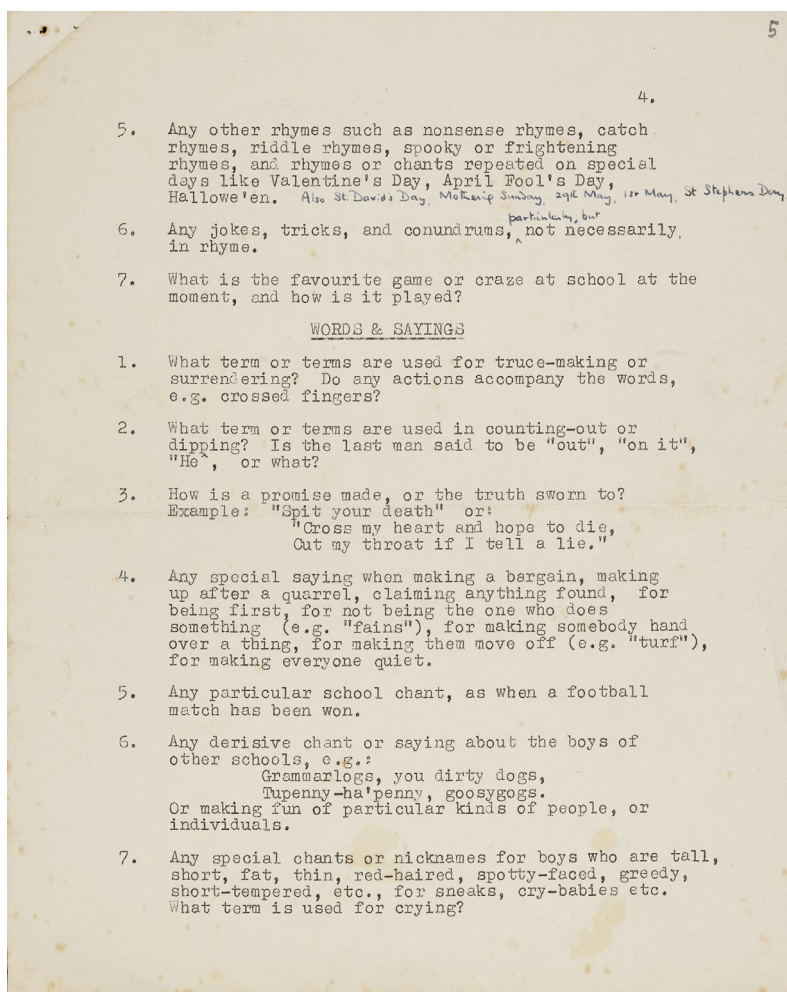


Figure 2.3 continued

cunning, luck, running across the street, jumping onto other people's backs, after dark, the end of term and so on.

In terms of administration, the second questionnaire removes the 'oral method' and favours the independence of the child in the written method, highlighting the comparative value of the children's responses. The discursive approach is also extended with the suggestion of general essays, on topics such as 'My favourite game in the playground (or round about my home)', 'Customs and rhymes for special days', and 'The charms, ways of fortune-telling, and magic that I know'.

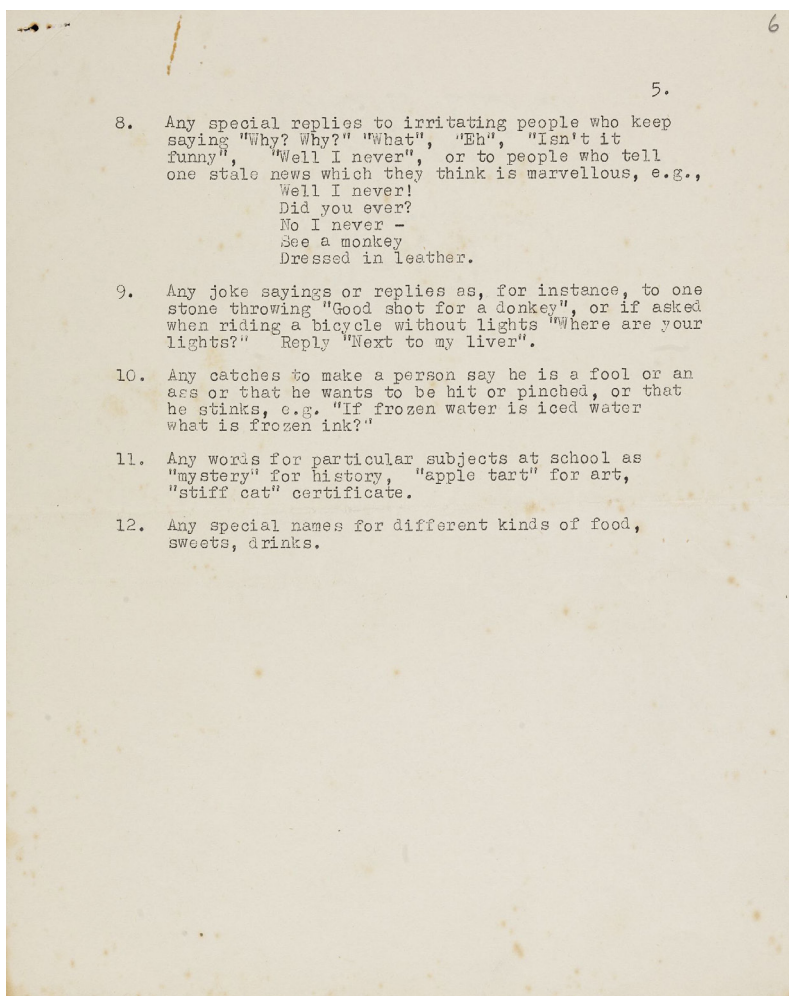


Figure 2.3 continued

Beyond these recommendations, however, the Opies emphasise that it is very much up to the teacher to decide how to collect the information. They also specifically welcome negative evidence and repeated mentions of the same thing. Above all, the questions are 'not given for solemn systematic answering, but are intended to be merely suggestions to assist collecting, and show the ground being covered' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 3r), something which the Opies continued to stress throughout their research. Indeed, by the time of the fourth questionnaire in 1960, Peter aptly remarked, in a letter to Mr J. S.

From: Mr & Mrs Peter Opie,
Rockbourne House,
100 High Street,
ALTON. HAMPSHIRE.

THE ORAL LORE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN - II

This is by way of being a supplement to our first questionnaire. The extent and intricacy of the lore current among school children has been shown to be considerably greater than was expected. There appears to be almost as much knowledge of traditional matter as there ever was, although the emphasis, particularly in children's play, seems to have shifted during the past half century. Some of the expressions and rhymes sent in have clearly been of post-war invention (mentioning pre-fabs, nylons, flying saucers, the Skylon, etc.), while other games, customs, and terms, which children have written down, are known to be old, and had, sometimes, been thought to be obsolete. Often children have touched upon subjects additional to those we had listed, and when the teachers concerned were so good as to inquire further on the points raised, fresh fields of custom and belief were revealed. The items listed below are all ones about which we have had particularly interesting replies from one or more districts, and about which we feel there may yet be much to learn.

The most satisfactory results have usually been obtained when each child in the class wrote down his replies himself; and it is an advantage to us to be able to compare the individual papers. General essays such as "My favourite game in the playground (or round about my home)", "Customs and rhymes for special days" (e.g. Valentine's Day, April Fool's Day, Shrove Tuesday, May Day, Oak Apple Day, Hallowe'en, Christmas), "The charms, ways of fortune-telling, and magic that I know", have also produced valuable details. If children are describing games they should, however, be reminded that we particularly want to be told the names of the games, and any technical terms or expressions used when playing them.

May we add that each child should put his name and age on his contribution, and that where children come to the school from a distance it is useful if they also give their home district.

1.

Figure 2.4 'The Oral Lore of School Children - [Questionnaire] II'. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fols 13r-15r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Soane, headmaster of Kinnoull School in Perth, Scotland, '[i]t isn't a questionnaire really so much as a "suggestionnaire", with examples of subjects which children might write about' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 90r). The results they garnered by this means are therefore very varied in content and form and are far from the uniformly formatted set of responses that the questionnaire method might suggest. We now turn to some examples and their associated correspondence to consider the

GAMES

2.

Names and description of:

1. Any game involving running across the street.
2. Any game or prank played after dark.
3. Any game (other than 'Leap Frog') involving jumping onto other people's backs.
4. Any game in which one uses penknives, buttons, conkers, cob nuts, cigarette cards, milk bottle tops, or such like.
5. Any game or feat in which one has to use strength or cunning.
6. The different kinds of games of 'Hopscotch'* (girls), 'Fivestones' + (girls or boys), and 'Marbles', including the names of the different kinds of marbles.
7. Calls to start or end a game, or to begin a race.
8. Any way of choosing who is to be 'He' or 'On it' in a game, or which of two teams is to go first, other than by saying a counting-out or dipping rhyme.

CUSTOMS & BELIEFS

9. Any sayings or superstitions, or ways of telling one's fortune, connected with bus tickets, cigarette packets, film stars, the lines on the pavement, or any other way of fortune telling.
10. Any objects such as an ambulance, hearse, or other vehicle, white horse or dog, which it is considered lucky or unlucky to see in the street.
11. Any sayings or actions which are considered to bring good or bad luck in games or in, for instance, school exams.
12. Any ways of giving oneself courage before doing something daring.
13. Any sayings or customs at the beginning or end of term, or repeated in the hope of getting a holiday

* Also known as Paldies, Peovers, or Beds.

+ Also known as Jack Stones, Chuckie Stones, or Dibs.

Figure 2.4 continued

relationships that developed and the role they played in the gathering of information, and also its interpretation.

Teachers as collaborative researchers: data collection and contextualisation

In this section, we draw on marginalia and annotations made by teachers on their students' contributions, and on their correspondence with the Opies in the collecting process and following the publication of the

3.

14. Sayings or customs on the first day of the month, or when somebody has a birthday, or when somebody is found to be wearing new clothes, or on any other special day or occasion.
15. Any games, customs, or superstitions involving
(a) kissing, (b) spitting.

WORDS & SAYINGS

16. Greeting to, or name for, one arriving late at school.
17. Name for the look-out or sentinel while others are wrong-doing, and the warning cry when someone is approaching.
18. The term for ragging, larking, or whatever having a wild scrimmage is called.
19. Names of any punishments, ordeals, or other forms of retribution when one person has made himself unpopular.
20. Names for, or sayings when hair pulling, arm twisting, or hitting, bumping, or piling up on somebody.
21. Sayings when challenging someone to fight; terms for fighting, kicking, or hurting somebody.
22. Any secret languages or codes.

Figure 2.4 continued

Opies' first book based on the students' material, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), copies of which the Opies apparently gifted to schools and adults who had taken part in the research (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Opie MSS 46 fols 69–262). Taken together, these exemplify how the Opies entered into a dialogue over time with certain teachers and other correspondents, who themselves became enthused by the study. Cataloguing these letters, we too felt drawn into these relationships and began to feel a sense of acquaintance with some of these individuals, so warm, informal and at times revealing were their letters to the couple.

One such teacher was the aforementioned Dr G. G. Urwin, Head of English at Sale County Grammar School for Boys and himself a literary scholar (e.g. Urwin, 1954; 1962), who embraced the Opies' study with gusto, and likewise enthused some of his students. It seems that the students became intrigued not only by the Opies' work but also by the Opies themselves. In 1952, for example, Urwin wrote to the couple that pupils of his who had 'helped' him with the Opies research 'take quite a sympathetic – and an amused – interest in your work. It has sent quite a number of them off to the library to look at your Nursery Rhymes' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 216r). In a conversational letter to Peter Opie in January 1953, he further describes 'the excitement there was at school when one boy brought along a photo of the mysterious Mr. Opie – one in the Dispatch, was it?' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 219r). It is intriguing to imagine the Opies taking on the form of folkloric figures themselves to the students. Urwin also appears to have been open with the children about the purpose and use of their contributions, discussing the Opies' proposed book with some of his pupils. Such discussions in turn generated further information, as he recounts in a letter dated November 1953:

Even the prospectus of your book leaves me dazed by the very magnitude and latitude (if that is the word) of your information. Two of us have read it, and I have chatted with various classes about some extracts. As a result of these ten-minute chats, I have compiled a couple of pages of extra information.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 223r)

Alongside information from his students in response to the Opies' questions, Urwin also shares his own observations of children's play and lore (cf. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS Opie 1 fol. 136v), such as witnessing the observation of an ambulance-related superstition while driving a group of children to a party, some of his own youthful play memories, particularly when his pupils contributed games that chimed with his childhood experiences, and aspects of his own family's remembered and contemporary lore: 'Younger daughter recently came home from school full of "Goody gumdrops"', he writes to Peter Opie in January 1953, adding that now he knows it is 'a catchphrase from "Educating Archie" [a radio comedy broadcast by the BBC Light Programme]' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie,

Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 219r). In a direct response to the questionnaire preamble, in which the Opies welcome ‘any comments on the contributions or annotations on particular rhymes (“very popular here” or “I remember this in my youth, c.1910”)', Urwin also added information to his pupils’ responses, expanding on them or explaining particular aspects. Sometimes this was inscribed in his own hand on the children’s contributions, and sometimes it was typed or handwritten on a separate document complementing the children’s responses.

Urwin’s additions potentially contextualised some of the children’s examples for the Opies and certainly, decades later, for ourselves as cataloguers without the period-specific cultural knowledge to interpret certain items of lore. One child, for example, submitted the word ‘Brumas’, glossing it as ‘a little bear on top – a bald man’ (Figure 2.5). Urwin clarifies this reference as ‘Brumas (the “Bare”)', indicating the presence of some punning word play (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS Opie 1 fol. 146v). This opened a window for us onto a phenomenon of the early 1950s: the first polar bear cub to be born at London Zoo. Brumas was a sensation and boosted visitor numbers. Her popularity made her the subject of a song, and she was celebrated with souvenirs (Zoological Society of London, n.d.). While we will probably never know if this was coined to refer to bare-headed persons more generally, or a particular one in the Sale

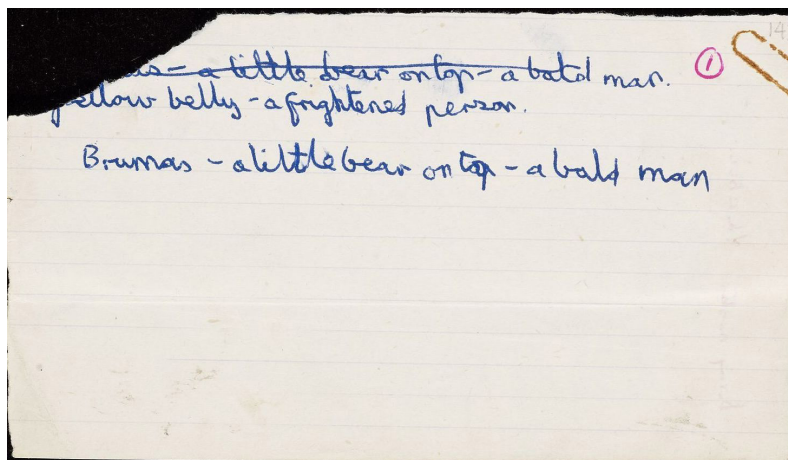


Figure 2.5 ‘Brumas’, Sale County Grammar School, Cheshire. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 143r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

area, and it is unclear whether the epithet was confined to this particular school or more widespread, for this child, Brumas' fame was a stimulus for playful language use around an event that affected the wider national consciousness (Bannister, 2019).

Another teacher who went the extra mile to offer additional information and context to the games and lore which her pupils shared, and who has also enlightened us as researchers, is Joyce Terrett, a teacher at Glanmor Secondary School for Girls in Swansea. As well as submitting the students' responses themselves, she drew them together in a notebook, dated 1952, hand-copying the original contributions and adding further information, such as whether a rhyme was performed while skipping, as a counting-out rhyme, as part of a chasing game, or accompanied by clapping, although she noted on the first page that 'many rhymes are used both for counting out and for skipping' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 359r). Furthermore, her 144-page collated text (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fols 359r–436v) opens with a brief history of Swansea and gives details of the distinct districts from which her pupils hailed with regard to their geographical and man-made features, social class demographics and industry (Bannister, 2019). Accompanying the rhymes she transcribed are the names of these districts, numbered to indicate how many children from each submitted a specific contribution (Figure 2.6).

As with Urwin, Terrett drew connections between games and lore contributed by her pupils and broader cultural phenomena. Accompanying her transcription of a skipping rhyme – for example, 'The more we are together bom bom' – she writes, 'I think this was the Froth Blowers' Anthem about 1935–7' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 423r). The Ancient Order of Froth Blowers was founded in 1924, and its 'official song', 'The More We Are Together' (Roud Folk Song Index no. 23730²), was 'hugely popular at the time and was featured in numerous community singing events' as well as in films, according to Cook (2012: 228). Terrett's contribution, as with Urwin's on Brumas, points to a broader popular cultural source for a piece of childlore and demonstrates that this song enjoyed continuing popularity up to at least the 1950s as a playground rhyme (Bannister, 2019).

Finally, it is worth noting that some of the Opies' contacts took the opportunity to bring their own interests and areas of expertise to the couple's research. Correspondents suggested source material, such as

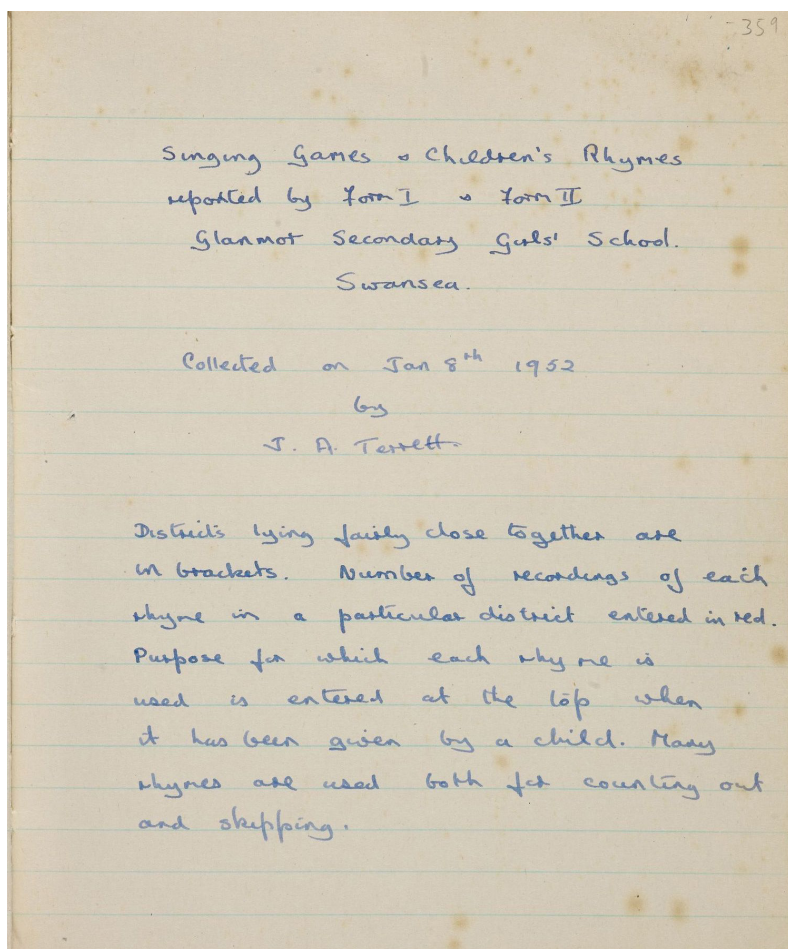


Figure 2.6 Cover page of 'Singing games and children's rhymes' booklet, collated by Joyce Terrett, Glanmor Secondary Girls' School, Swansea, Wales, 1952. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 359r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

books the Opies may wish to read relating to the folklore of a particular area, or signposted published articles which could augment their research. Some sent cuttings to the Opies from their local newspapers or journals. Others sought to point them in fresh directions, suggesting that they might like to consider the impact of rural depopulation on play, or the size of a school, or number of pupils, on the games played in the playground there (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 107).

Teacher impact on children's contributions revisited

Returning to the earlier discussion of the teacher collaborators' impact on children's contributions, letters from the Opies' teacher correspondents indicate that there is some evidence that teachers did, consciously or otherwise, affect the nature of the contributions the Opies received, but perhaps in different ways than those envisaged by commentators. There are various reasons for this, one being that some correspondents, perhaps understandably, did not fully grasp what the Opies were seeking for their research. 'I wonder if I helped you enough?' asked one correspondent, Jean C. Rodger, writing in 1959 in response to receiving a copy of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Addressing the Opies as 'friends', and asking after the couple's children, she writes, 'I thought it was merely games you wanted. I had notes of superstitions etc. etc., dozens of jotters full. I scattered all to the four winds less than a year ago, but may have some riddles somewhere around' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 120r).

The idea that teachers may have had somewhat of a different agenda to the Opies, and perhaps era-specific perceptions of what was appropriate for children to know and pass on, is also borne out in some letters: 'I am amazed at the amount of material I missed or rather dismissed as being either too well-known, too rude for publication, or else an example of adult rather than child lore', writes Harry Sellick, a teacher at Ponders End Secondary School for Boys in Enfield, Middlesex, in November 1959. He goes on to give the first lines of a rhyme: 'My brother had a pigeon / Which flew away to Spain ...', stopping tantalisingly short and adding that he thought it had been submitted 'as a sort of dare by the boy concerned', finishing with 'I didn't bother to send it' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 111r–111v). Interestingly, it is at the point of sending in the contribution to the Opies that the teacher intervened, rather than his role as teacher appearing to affect whether the more risqué contributions were submitted by the pupils in the first place. On the other hand, we will never know what pupils chose to withhold in the collecting process, and the extent to which this varied from school to school. In his letter to the Opies, Sellick certainly appears to lend credence to Boyes' (1990) suggestion that teachers may not wish their schools to be identified as having supplied improper material, by his somewhat wry suggestion that, 'I am sure that a lot of dear headmistresses will be sure that their girls never knew such rhymes as you include.' Such reactions were

certainly of their time. Indeed, Iona later pointed out that any ‘rude’ words stronger than ‘knickers’ were forbidden by their publisher at this time (Opie, 2014: 204).

Nevertheless, there are teachers like Janet Christie, a classics teacher and women’s advisor at Kirkcaldy High School, Scotland, who, in response to an enquiry from the Opies as to ‘rude rhymes’, specifically asked her students for them (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 3 fol. 258r). She marked any rude ones with an asterisk in their contributions, which include one on which she noted ‘Rude rhymes – contributed anonymously!’ and containing several rhymes which refer to ‘bum’ (Figure 2.7).

It seems that some children relished the chance to document ‘rude’ rhymes with impunity and found their own ways to avoid being identified with this material, just in case.

Meanwhile, Janet Christie also sent in some ‘really obscene ones’ which she found in the school, including the following:

[O]n a lavatory:

Jack and Mary went to the dairy
J. pulled out his long canary
Gave her a shilling and she was willing
Gave her a crown and she lay down
Gave her some scent and in it went
Gave her some gravy and out came the baby.

This was illustrated very fully.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 3 fol. 260r)

The Opies and at least some of their collaborators did not shy away from scatological and bawdy items, therefore, but these were not included in the Opies’ publications, given the attitudes of the time.

Perhaps more dispiriting for us, as childhood researchers, than teachers who did not forward some contributions are letters which suggest that they believed their pupils unable to express themselves sufficiently well for the Opies’ purposes (Bishop et al., 2021). Frank Noble, for example, a teacher at Knighton County Secondary School in Wales, and an archaeologist, informed the Opies that they should not expect much ‘literary ability’ from a new intake of pupils due to a ‘50%

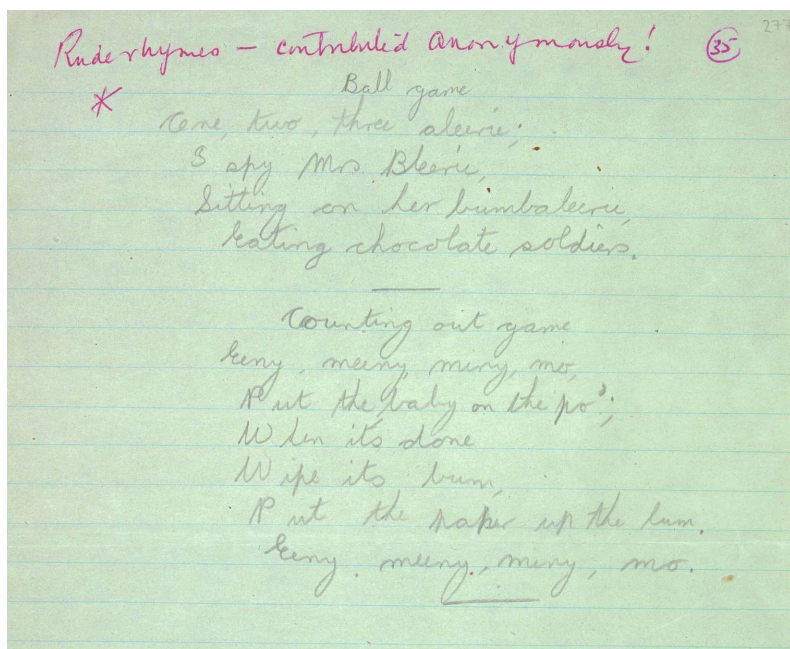


Figure 2.7 'Rude rhymes', submitted by Janet Christie, Kirkcaldy High School, Scotland, c.1952. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 3 fol. 277r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

grammar school cream off' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 107r). What is not perceived in earlier critiques of the Opies, though, is their awareness of such attitudes and the ways they tried to circumvent them. Their questionnaire guidance, for example, states that 'children should be free to write what they like', that '[t]hey should be told that spelling is not important' and that there is no need for the papers to be corrected by staff (see [Figure 2.2](#) above; Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie fols 2r-3r). In a draft cover letter for Questionnaire IV, the couple state that they wish to see all papers, 'good, bad, and indifferent' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 52r), reiterating that staff should not correct papers, and that the more children taking part, the better. While the phrasing of their guidance is still somewhat pejorative, and the impact of their instructions is hard to judge, particularly at this early stage of their research, their comments demonstrate awareness on the Opies' part that teachers, as educators, possessed a different 'agenda' (Bishop et al., 2021). This is particularly apparent now we know that

questions from the questionnaires were used as classroom exercises and set as homework, and that gaining a child's-eye view of their peer culture would run up against obstacles, however well-meant.

A final example shows that the Opies were not always remote from their teacher correspondents or 'mysterious' to the pupils who contributed, and did not rely solely on the questionnaire responses and follow-up correspondence. In the chapter on 'Half-Belief' which forms part of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, the Opies quote a 12-year-old boy about the practice in Barnsley of finding a lucky stone, spitting on it, and throwing it over one's head without watching it land to bring luck (seeing it land brings cowardice) (Opie and Opie, 1959: 252). A footnote adds:

His teacher writes: Markin [sic] brought me a 'lucky stone', a curious clinker from a blast furnace with smooth sage-green parts and an odd half-natural, half artefact look about it. I find that these are normal but not exceptionally common products of the silicates in the furnace, and their odd appearance would be enough to cast the glamourie over them for children.

(Opie and Opie, 1959: 252)

The teacher in question was Linden Huddlestone, who taught English at Ecclesfield Grammar School near Sheffield in Yorkshire, and this comment is contained in a letter of c.1954–5 relating to his students' earlier contributions to the second questionnaire, sent the previous year (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 10 fol. 545r).³ Question 11 asks for 'any sayings or actions which are considered to bring good or bad luck in games or, for instance, school exams' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Opie MS 46 fol. 14), to which one pupil, Bruce Malkin [sic], had replied 'Spit on a lucky stone' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 10 fol. 555v), and another, Frazer Wright, described the practice of throwing it and an associated belief about cowardice (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 10 fol. 549r).

Bruce Malkin was a contributor whom we traced in 2012 as part of a previous project.⁴ He recalls:

The Opies came to school after receiving our responses to the questionnaire. I remember particularly a conversation when Peter and Iona wanted to know what a 'lucky stone' was (No. 11). In Sheffield

many footpaths were made of ‘clinker’, the black residue from the furnaces of the steel factories. Sometimes in this clinker there would be yellowy/green striped bits like opaque glass and these were the lucky stones. We would keep them in our pockets all the time, only being discarded if we found a better one. If we needed luck for a special purpose we would spit on it. The Opies talked individually to a number of pupils and to us as a group about their book and our responses.

(Email to Julia Bishop, 3 February 2012)

When asked his impression of the Opies, Bruce replied, ‘they were kind, and, I mean, they just listened’ (Interview with Julia Bishop, 3 April 2012). Thus, not only did teachers’ supplemental observations to the children’s contributions sometimes find their way into the Opies’ publications, but the Opies on occasion made direct contact with the children as well as interviewing them ‘by post’ to talk to them in person about their contribution.

Goodwill and reciprocity as method

The Opies were by no means alone in adopting a written survey method for gathering information for their study or in using volunteers to help collect it. According to Bulmer (1998: 153), British precursors of social surveys in the modern sense can be seen in the work of Charles Booth and Seeborn Rowntree in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and there were many examples prior to the Second World War (Bulmer et al., 1991). One of the most notable was Mass Observation, established in 1937 to document people’s everyday lives through observation and volunteer writers (Hubble, 2006).⁵ A number of folklore surveys were also founded in the interwar period, such as that of the National Museum of Wales in 1937, based on a bilingual ‘Questionnaire on Welsh Folk Culture’ (Hughes, 1979), and the Irish Folklore Commission, founded in 1935 (Almqvist, 1977: 9), whose many volunteers included teachers collecting local folklore and responding to the Commission’s questionnaires (Dúchas.ie, 2023). The work of the Irish Folklore Commission also included the remarkable Schools’ Folklore Scheme of 1937–9 which involved some 50,000 primary school children across Ireland collecting folklore from family and community members (Dúchas.ie, 2023). The post-war era included the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, instigated by Angus McIntosh at the

University of Edinburgh in 1948 (McIntosh, 1952), closely followed by the Survey of English Dialects (1950–61), led by Harold Orton at the University of Leeds (Orton et al., 1962–71).

At the time the Opies began collecting the folklore of school-aged children, UCL was engaged in a folklore-collecting scheme, as mentioned by Peter in his 1957 paper ‘The Present State of Folklore Studies in England’ (Opie, 1957), delivered at the British Association annual meeting in Dublin as part of a symposium exploring this subject in relation to Britain and Ireland. Peter expresses disquiet at the methods of UCL’s English Folklore surveys, particularly singling out a participant perspective: ‘Have they considered the reaction of somebody who receives one of their questionnaires, however willing he may be to help?’, he queried (1957: 470). This is contrasted with the Opies’ own network and the relationships they are forging, which, Peter suggests, sets them apart from other large-scale research projects. Among a number of principles he sets out, ‘which should guide anybody conducting any kind of survey involving the co-operation of other people’, he includes the need for reciprocity in folklore collecting and the human relationships on which research is based:

[The researcher] has to offer something in return, even if it is only humanity. For instance, if I may mention my own survey, either my wife or myself replies personally to every single communication we receive, and we reckon, incidentally, that during the past few years, we have written not less than 7,000 letters between us.

(1957: 470)

This is consistent with the promise of personal replies to respondents who answered their appeal in the 1951 letter to *The Sunday Times*, cited above, and explains the amount of effort the Opies put into maintaining their address books and keeping intellectual control not only of the examples they were receiving, but of their correspondence. As Peter’s 1957 address also noted, there is a long tradition of voluntary work among individuals and local and amateur societies in folklore-related research in England. Iona and Peter were skilled at leveraging this support in a way which appears akin to the concept of ‘crowdsourcing’ but is distinguished by the personal touch that Iona and Peter brought to it (cf. Barnes, 2014; Curtis, 2014).

As Iona acknowledged, this principle of reciprocity, realised in large part through letter-writing, not only benefited their research, but in turn reduced their own isolation, as scholars outside ‘university walls’:

One of the pleasures of that informal method we used was that our correspondents became our friends. We wrote chatty letters back and forth, and when we needed to know more about the rules of the game, or to understand the trickier points of marbles, then the teacher could ask the child to write to us direct, just to explain.

(Opie, 2014: 200)

The letters within the archive also reveal that the Opies thanked many of their adult collaborators, who had distributed the questionnaires for them, with copies of their book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959). It appears that contributors and schools received copies of the Opies' book almost as soon as it was published, leading to an outpouring of thanks from correspondents, who expressed surprise and delight at such unexpected generosity. 'Schools are often asked for help in certain projects', wrote Henry Valentine, head teacher of Aberdeen's Powis Secondary School, 'but not so often rewarded as generously and graciously as you have done' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 69r).⁶ Another describes it as a 'very large return' for their own 'very small piece of work' and relates the pleasure that his 10-year-old daughter experienced on finding her own contribution in the text (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 79r). The Opies also seem to have inscribed some of the books with a personal message, one collaborator writing that, while she 'wept with laughter' at the content of particular pages, she was 'heart-warmed by the words on the fly-leaf' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 74r). Another 'delighted' contributor wrote, 'I was going to buy a copy and send to you, and ask you to autograph it for me, and now you've sent me one' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 75r). The evidence thus suggests that the response of collaborators to being named, and their schools identified, in the books is one of pleasure, amusement and pride, rather than intimidation, and that it was publishing standards of the time that were largely responsible for the absence of bawdy and scatological material in the book, rather than an absence in the collection itself.

In discussing the concept of reciprocity, the folklorist Ian Russell (2006: 16) argues against its interpretation in fieldwork as a 'transactional' approach. Rather, he suggests, reciprocity is 'a process that develops hand-in-hand with the building of relationships and the growth of mutual trust over an extended period of time'. As if echoing Peter Opie's address almost precisely half a century earlier, Russell appeals

to 'humanity and friendship' as most important in generating 'balanced' relationships in the field. Arguably in this case, the benefit balance tips towards the Opies, who, the letters reveal, take the opportunity to respond to letters of thanks with requests for assistance with the next phase of their work. Iona's emphasis on correspondents becoming friends, and the fact that correspondence shows that their contacts felt similarly valued and recognised as individuals, allows their approach to transcend possible charges of cynicism, instead pointing towards a 'collaborative' research model for the Opies and their correspondents. While the Opies' working papers are far from comprehensively catalogued and this chapter therefore draws on only a handful of cases, we suggest that this area clearly calls for greater research, contributing as it does to our understanding of the significance of what might be termed 'goodwill' and the notion of 'reciprocity' in the Opies' research methodology.

Conclusion: the value of the archive

Evaluations of the Opies' methodology have hitherto been based primarily on their books. This chapter has highlighted that Iona and Peter did in fact write a number of scholarly articles between them about their approach and methods (P. Opie, 1953; 1954; 1957; 1963; 1964; I. Opie, 1989). The chapter has also demonstrated the potential of their archival collection as an extensive source of material additional to that which was published to suggest more nuanced interpretations of the Opies' approach and achievements. It would not have been straightforward or necessarily enlightening for them to have published their questionnaires at the time of their research, since even the four main questionnaires seem to have been in a more or less continual state of development, and there were many custom questionnaires developed for specific correspondents and the different emphases and focuses that arose over the many years of their research. Publication of their questionnaires would also have only told half of the story, in that much of the Opies' questioning also took place via their correspondence and, as we now know, school visits to talk to their youthful contributors in person, in response to the initial examples gathered. Consequently, the materials gathered are not uniform or standardised, and the full details of an example are sometimes distributed between a number of documents in the collection. Nevertheless, it is also true that the emphasis in the questionnaires is very much on writing as the medium of communication. Such drawings as are

included may be the children's own idea or suggested by the teachers. In time, the Opies turned to other ways of gathering material, such as audio recording and observation (Bishop, 2014).

In so much of the archival collection, it is the Opies' humanity which comes through, their ability to listen and to take seriously the testimony of children in all its guises and without sentimentality, and their openness to suggestions from their collaborators. Above all, they embodied the principle of reciprocity in research, at least in respect of their adult collaborators. Perhaps through the archive and future projects linking it back to the publications, we can extend that to the child contributors themselves during their lifetime. We can also now bring to light more specifically the relationship between the Opies' research techniques and all of the data they gathered, adding back in factors of gender and age and maybe socio-economic status and ethnicity (see Bernstein, 1960: 178–9), helping to make the materials more interpretable from the point of view of the social sciences and enhancing the longitudinal value that their archival collection undoubtedly holds.

Notes

- 1 The Opie Collection is now distributed between the Bodleian Libraries Special Collections, the British Library Sound Archive (<https://www.bl.uk/collections/opie-collection-of-childrens-games-and-songs>) and the Folklore Society Archive.
- 2 The Roud indexes can be found at <https://archives.vwml.org/search/roud>.
- 3 The letter is undated, though Iona has noted 'Entered 2/2/55' at the top. The previous letter from Huddleston is dated 24 August 1954.
- 4 'A Study of the Relationship between Media, Commercial Markets and Children's Play in the UK between 1950 and 2011' was generously supported by a British Academy Research Grant, no. SG111215.
- 5 Mass Observation continued into the early 1950s and was revived in the 1980s. Iona and Peter Opie themselves drew on Mass Observation's reports in their research (Opie and Opie, 1959: xv).
- 6 This letter is erroneously dated 13 January 1959, presumably a slip for 1960, since *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* was not published until November 1959.

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Hopscotching the Opies: playing (with) the archive in Bloomsbury

Michael Eades

‘After the main game was over, the player often had to walk through the diagram in different ways’

(Opie and Opie, 1997: 101)

Part of what makes the Opies so intriguing is the fact that they seem so anomalous, so out of place. As independent scholars, untenured, writing in relative seclusion in rural Hampshire, this husband-and-wife team have proved ripe for mythologising as eccentric outsiders. The independence, the separateness, the outsider status, is all part of the Opie ‘brand’. In this chapter, I want to probe this mythology. Following traces and hints uncovered by the Playing the Archive project, I want to both resituate and displace the Opies, exploring their links to a very specific place: Bloomsbury in central London. Placing them here, at the heart of London’s intellectual, cultural and post-Imperial infrastructure, allows us to delve into the personal and cultural histories of this well-connected couple, and to encounter connections to some surprising figures. These figures include the pharmaceutical magnate and collector Henry Wellcome, documentary photographer Nigel Henderson and the Mass Observation movement. In Bloomsbury, considered both a geographical area and a cultural ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977: 128–35), these figures criss-cross one another. They leave overlapping traces across a tightly packed network of streets, institutions, squares.

The Playing the Archive project has links to Bloomsbury. These are found both in the project’s connections to UCL, where part of the project team was based, and via dissemination activities held at Bloomsbury-based institutions such as the Wellcome Collection. This geographical framing is important, as I suggest below, as it helps to

draw our attention to previously underexplored aspects of the Opies' lives and work. These currents, we might say, are brought to the surface by the 'stirring' of the Opies' work and legacy enacted by a project like *Playing the Archive*. In digitising batches of the Opies' papers, deploying them in exhibitions, using their work, images and voice recordings in public engagement activities, the project has opened up a new and more complex framework through which to approach the Opies as cultural figures.

Starting out from the Wellcome Collection's 2019–20 exhibition *Play Well*, where research outputs from the *Playing the Archive* project were featured and a version of the Opies' legacy curated, the chapter is structured around a non-linear walk through Bloomsbury undertaken in late December 2019. Drawing on a brief but suggestive mention of the Opies found in Ben Highmore's 2006 article 'Hopscotch modernism', the following chapter enacts a psychogeographic 'hopscotching' of the Opies and their legacy.

The enquiry that follows in this chapter is both scholarly and personal. The Opies are my maternal grandparents, my mum's mother and father. Their 'Lifework and Legacy' is also my family history. The geography is personal, too. As a Research Fellow at the University of London, between 2013 and 2021 I spent years studying, and working within, the communities, histories and institutions of Bloomsbury. The uncovering of my grandparents' connections to these same cultural infrastructures has been both extraordinary and, in many ways, unsettling.

Written as it is from an impartial and 'compromised' scholarly perspective (as a relative of the Opies), the approach that I take in what follows is therefore a marrying of personal writing and intellectual investigation. Methodologically, this piece is both practice-based and in itself playful. It presents a 'hopscotch' from place to place, subject to subject, Bloomsbury square to Bloomsbury square. It is a genealogical delve both into the cultural and intellectual history of Bloomsbury, its institutions and traditions, and my own family history.

Playing well

Four days before Christmas, 2019. I am standing in the Wellcome Collection's ground floor gallery, given over to the exhibition *Play Well*, curated by Shamita Sharmacharja. At this time, relatively early on a Sunday morning, it is currently still quite quiet. Already, though, you

can see that it is starting to fill up with people drifting around. There are a lot of parents here with kids, letting them run around the gallery and play on some of the interactive exhibits.

Standing where I am, in this alcove, I have the strange experience of listening to the voice of my grandmother playing over a speaker in the quiet gallery. It is a voice that is familiar, but at the same time strange. It is a version of the voice that I knew well, recorded much earlier in her life, before I knew her and indeed before I was born. It is a younger, posher voice, recorded before some of the received pronunciation had mellowed out of it. The voices of children at play come over the speakers, too: 'I'm Popeye the sailor man', 'When I go swimming, I kiss all the women'. These are schoolyard chants and songs, field recordings. An exhibition panel reveals that some of them were made only a very short walk away from the gallery in which I am currently standing, in Coram's Fields, Bloomsbury, in 1974.

This is a recording that has ended up being presented in a gallery around a mile from where it was originally captured. The recordings are also part of the Sound Archive at the British Library, just across the road from the Wellcome Collection. The recordings were digitised in an earlier Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project, Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age, 2009–11, involving many of the same researchers involved in Playing the Archive, some of whom are themselves working locally, in Bloomsbury, at UCL. These same recordings also featured in the *Time Telephone* installation at the Museum of Childhood in 2019, a Playing the Archive output explored in [Chapter 7](#) in this volume.

'Show your legs'; 'Teacher's got no brains'. 'A Sailor went to sea, sea, sea' ...

Standing here, listening to the voice of my grandmother, looking at a photograph of her younger self. This is a ghostly experience. It is made all the more so by the fact that I know that this recording was made so close to where I am standing.

Here is a photograph of them, too: the Opies ([Figure 3.1](#)). It is a staged image, a publicity photo, taken in 1962. The two of them are jumping a rope, skipping. Peter is in a three-piece suit and tie, serious glasses and shoes, flower in buttonhole, intellectually balding. It's a look that screams 'gentleman scholar'. Iona is a more glamorous figure. Thin and neat, she's also the one who is smiling, hair swept back, looking young and attractive. The kids around them are in an 'austerity Britain'



Figure 3.1 Iona and Peter Opie seen skipping at the local village school at Liss, Hampshire, before receiving honorary MA degrees at Oxford University. Phillip Jackson/Shutterstock.

uniform of short trousers and tank tops, pleated skirts, hair clips, short-back-and-sides haircuts.

This is an image that reeks of the post-war, austerity-era civic landscape. The exhibition itself foregrounds this idea. Two paces away, the 1951 Ministry of Health film *Your Children's Play* is screening. The film, by Brian Smith, emphasises the importance of imaginative play, and seems to be an early sign of the loosening of social conventions that would take place for the gilded post-war generation – as attitudes shifted away from regimentation and convention and towards greater freedom. A few paces away again, in another alcove, we come across two images from the documentary photographer Nigel Henderson showing street life in the East End of London. These images, ‘Children Outside 46 Chisenhale Road, boy with stick’ and ‘Three Children Playing Hopscotch’ are from a set of photographs that I have seen before used in close relation to the Opies.

Hopscotch modernism

In his 2006 article ‘Hopscotch modernism’, Ben Highmore uses Nigel Henderson’s East End photographs of children playing hopscotch as a starting point for an exploration of a tradition, or shadow tradition, in inter- and post-war modernism. Henderson’s work and practice, he suggests, was an example of a trend in post-war modernism that reached back to interwar movements like Surrealism, Mass Observation and the Parisian Collège de sociologie as well as carrying forward into the post-war movements such as The Independent Group.

Henderson’s photographs, he suggests, were examples of a strand of modernism interested in everyday life, ethnography and social documentary. The overlapping of art, ethnography, anthropology Highmore presents here was itself in part due to the evolution of scholarship and the academy. The 1930s–1940s was a period when many now-familiar disciplinary boundaries had yet to emerge. He evokes a fluidity here, a cross-disciplinary spirit rooted, in no small part, in the fact that scholarly disciplines as now understood had not yet hardened and sedimented as intellectual fields. ‘Sociology’ and ‘Cultural Studies’ were still to be invented. As he puts it:

The cross-disciplinary attitude that is evident in the interwar and immediate post-second world war period is due in part to the fact that the disciplines, especially the newer social sciences, have yet to harden into policeable enclaves, and are still the province of amateurs as much as university professors.

(Highmore, 2006: 71)

In this context, Highmore suggests that ideas of childhood and play (and children at play) were particularly resonant for certain strands of modernist thinkers, writers, artists, architects. His argument is that children and childhood often stood in their work for the messy energy of everyday life that modernism (in the clean and rational tradition of Le Corbusier) struggled to accommodate. Children come to represent, in other words, everyday life and everyday humanity (Highmore, 2006: 76–7). This connects, he suggests, to the projected links between childhood and ‘savagery’ found in their work as well as in that of French writers such as Roger Caillois and, in a UK context, those involved in the proto-anthropological Mass Observation movement. He notes: ‘Within the context of Mass-Observation the photographing of children playing was a way of stressing the anthropological aspect of the work, a way of

pointing to the ritualistic and totemistic elements of culture still present within industrial society' (Highmore, 2006: 72).

Hopscotch is also important here. Throughout his article, Highmore uses hopscotch as a metaphor for a non-linear approach to thinking about canonisation and intellectual traditions. Rather than a teleological 'line' that proceeds neatly from one point to another, he offers a more messy, sketchy 'grid' which allows for unexpected connections between different figures as well as a certain amount of temporal jumping about. At the same time, however, a focus on hopscotch allows Highmore to uncover a strand of modernism specifically interested in the game itself. This is, he suggests, a modernism interested in everyday life, and forms of 'archaic' rituals found lingering within the everyday, the atavism of hopscotch grids drawn on modern pavements being a perfect example.

Meditating on the pictures of East End children playing hopscotch found in Henderson's work, Highmore suggests:

The chalk outlines of the hopscotch game in Henderson's photographs are ... crucial. They point to coexistence of the age old and the temporary newness of now-time. In this, modernism is involved in the portrayal of simultaneity where tradition disturbs the new as much as the new could disrupt the traditional.

(Highmore, 2006: 72)

The Opies wrote about hopscotch, too.¹ In *Children's Games with Things*, they observe that hopscotch is highly unusual as an example of street games that 'leave traces behind them' (Opie and Opie, 1997: 95). As such, they suggest, the game of hopscotch is inherently related to memory and to nostalgia, with the sight of hopscotch grids, which appear out of nowhere before disappearing again, mysteriously, prompting childhood memories and a sense of continuity between past and present. As they note, 'hopscotch diagrams on pavements and in parks are welcome signs that tradition has not died out. "I saw a hopscotch last week", people will say; "I didn't think they played hopscotch anymore"' (Opie and Opie, 1997: 95).

Fittingly, the Opies themselves are mentioned in 'Hopscotch modernism'. Very briefly, in a footnote, Highmore notes: 'we should also mention the modernism of Peter and Iona Opie working in the 1950s as folklorists collecting the massive archives of nursery rhymes and children's games' (2006: 79). This reference is not expanded upon. The Opies are part of Highmore's survey, but have the status of an afterthought. They

are located very much on the periphery, towards the outer edge of the ‘hopscotch modernist’ grid.

Hopscotch, we might say, is a remarkably versatile game. This ancient pastime often seems to serve as an emblem for ‘traditional’ play and for a type of childhood culture and social context that is always, seemingly, on the verge of disappearing. The Opies note this, and Andrew Burn brings this up to date by underscoring that hopscotch has been a focal point for right-wing media panics about the loss of traditional childhood games in the UK’s playgrounds (Burn, 2014: 16). On the other hand, in art, culture and literature hopscotch has rich and resonant associations with modernist and postmodernist experimentation. Highmore sketches a ‘hopscotch modernist’ tradition in which he not only writes about the game, but uses it to inform his own mode of writing – an associative, non-linear ‘jumping’ or ‘skipping’ across a number of disciplinary lines. We should also think here of Julio Cortázar’s 1963 experimental novel *Hopscotch*, which presents an association of narrative fragments and disordered chapters that the reader is invited to ‘hop’ between. It is with all this in mind that we should now jump forwards ourselves, and ‘hop’ to a different square and different context, a different frame through which to view the Opies and their work.

Medicine men

The Wellcome Collection’s *Play Well* exhibition helps to situate the Opies in relation to the sub-tradition of ethnographic, ‘hopscotch’ modernism explored by Ben Highmore, placing them in an interdisciplinary moment of productive modernist ‘amateurism’. Another side to this tradition can be explored, however, in relation to the Opies, without even leaving the Wellcome Collection building.

A trip upstairs to another gallery takes us into a different context. On the first floor, a ‘permanent’ exhibition, *Medicine Man*, was (at the time that I undertook this walk in late 2019) open to the public. Closed since 2022, the exhibition was dedicated to telling the story of the collection’s founder, Henry Wellcome and dedicated to displaying a tiny fraction of the enormous collection that he gathered over the course of his life. As an interpretation panel puts it, this is ‘one of the world’s largest museum collections. Spanning continents, cultures and centuries, the objects reflect universal interest in health and the body’.

Up here, walking through the galleries, I find myself in a different moment, a different generation. Wellcome lived from 1853 to 1936.

Although the gallery is relatively new, the atmosphere that it evokes is purposefully heavier and darker than the galleries on the ground floor. It consciously evokes the heavy wood and glass display cases of a Victorian ethnographic museum and its predecessor, the gentlemanly ‘cabinet of curiosity’. The feeling up in this gallery, in other words, is one of the age of Imperialism. Dark display cases, ethnographic artefacts, Victorian photographs. The atmosphere up here might remind us, in fact, of Dan Hicks’s recent description of museums as ‘temporal devices, dark rooms crammed with unfulfilled obligations from across the British Empire and beyond, tools in Europe’s fashioning of Imperial worlds’ (2020: 22).

Only the tiniest fraction of Wellcome’s immense collections were on display in the *Medicine Man* gallery. The objects here, from coconut skull charms to ritual masks, prosthetic limbs to ‘amuletic necklaces’, glass artificial eyes to Egyptian canopic jars, had been selected to evoke the diversity of Wellcome’s hoard. These objects, which include numerous colonial photographs, are also supposed to evoke the lost Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, which Henry Wellcome created in 1913 on Wigmore Street in London. Even this museum, which lasted until 1932, had only housed a fraction of his ever-growing collection. Ghislaine Lawrence, for example, has noted that ‘[b]y the early 1930s, ... Wellcome had a hugely disparate collection of artefacts five times larger than that of the Louvre’ (2003: 51).

I am standing in front of a photograph (Figure 3.2). Taken in 1910, it shows Henry Wellcome sitting at the centre of a group of employees at the Wellcome Tropical Laboratories, Khartoum. Standing just behind Wellcome in this photograph is Iona Opie’s father, my great grandfather, Captain Robert Archibald. Sitting next to Wellcome, to his right, is Iona Opie’s godfather, Andrew Balfour. These two men, Archibald and Balfour, were close friends, fellow Scottish doctors working closely together in Africa. They must have both known Wellcome, and both were involved in establishing and working on the ‘floating laboratory’ established in Sudan in the early 1900s.

This photograph with its triangle of men helps to introduce a number of themes that are key to the Opie narrative. Collecting, Empire and Imperialism, distant fathers. All of these men were working in an Imperial context. Wellcome and Balfour, at least, were both also avid collectors and taxonomisers, founders of museums and collections including the ‘Medical Museum’ that forms the basis of the *Medicine Man* exhibition. Indeed, Wellcome’s lost Medical Museum was intended to gather together information on “‘folklore”, “items of curious medical lore”, “early traditions” and “quaint customs”” (Lawrence, 2003: 54).

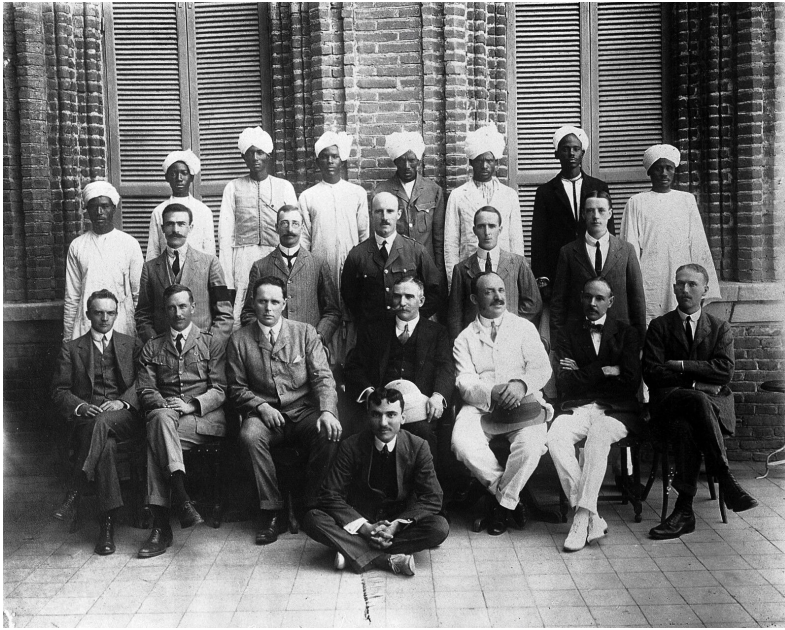


Figure 3.2 Staff at Wellcome Tropical Research Laboratory, Khartoum, c.1910. Robert Archibald is third row, centre. Andrew Balfour, second row, third from left. Henry Wellcome, second row, centre. Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0.

Wellcome's collecting was an explicitly colonial project, with the museum viewed as a piece of infrastructure that would be useful for the training of colonial officials. As Lawrence argues, while this museum was not easy for the public to access, 'One group of visitors for which Wellcome was prepared to cater ... were those guardians of the Empire whose duties brought them into contact with the "subject native races": [in Wellcome's own words] "Colonial and military officials, explorers, colonizers, planters, missionaries – would find it invaluable"' (2003: 61).

Iona Opie noted that both she and Peter 'were children of Empire. Peter's father was a surgeon in Bombay: mine was a pathologist – the director of the Wellcome Research Laboratory in Khartoum, in the Sudan' (Opie, 1988: 203). Here in the Wellcome galleries, amid all the fragments of his colonial collection, looking at photographs of Iona's father and godfather, you can perhaps glimpse a darker side of the roots of the shared Opie project. The impulse to collect, the ethnographic impulse to study and taxonomise, the fascination with fragments of atavistic culture locatable within the context of contemporary life. Their second major scholarly work, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, for example, states that:

the folklorist and anthropologist can, without travelling a mile from his door, examine a thriving unselfconscious culture (the word ‘culture’ here is used deliberately) which is as unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as little unaffected by it, as is the culture of some dwindling aboriginal tribe living out its helpless existence in the hinterland of a native reserve.

(Opie and Opie, 1959: 1–2)

And again, later in the same work: ‘it must, after all, be borne in mind that the children here under observation are only at the stage of development sometimes ascribed to a savage tribe, whom anthropologists are not at all surprised to find dominated by superstition’ (Opie and Opie, 1959: 210).

Such comments are jarring. Coming early in the Opies’ corpus, they represent a tone that seems outlandish, and somewhat at odds with the more progressive currents found in the same book. It is a tone that becomes far more muted over time, and which needs to be balanced against more complex and progressive tendencies found even within *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* itself. These include a determination to centre children as conscious social actors and to explore and commit to valuing a working-class street culture typically excluded from serious scholarly attention. All the same, we see here a darker side to the ‘Hopscotch Modernist’ ethnographic perspective, which is clearly linked to a particular class background and mindset. In the Opies’ case, this clearly connects – uncomfortably – to close family links to Imperialism and the British Empire. It is perhaps fitting in this regard to note that the *Medicine Man* gallery, where the photograph of Iona’s father was displayed, was itself closed in 2022, with the museum citing a need to reconsider how to properly curate and display ‘a collection that told a global story of health and medicine in which Black people, Indigenous peoples and people of colour were exoticised, marginalised and exploited’ (Wellcome Collection, 2021).

Bloomsbury Way

Another ‘jump’ is needed. It is time to skip forward to another square on our hopscotch grid. Ben Highmore doesn’t explicitly say so, but much of the intellectual and artistic work that he explores throughout this article is, in fact, rooted in Bloomsbury. The ‘thoroughly modern couple’ (Highmore, 2006: 70) at the heart of the article – Nigel Henderson and

his wife Judith – were very much a Bloomsbury couple: born and raised in the area and very intimately linked to its artistic and intellectual heritage. Judith, whose maiden name was Stephen, was, in fact, Virginia Woolf's niece (Walsh, 2001: 17). The Independent Group, of which Henderson and Alison and Peter Smithson were members, was founded in Bloomsbury, too, through connections made at the Slade School of Art on Gower Street (Walsh, 2001: 17–19; Massey, 1995: 33–5).

This geographic focus provides another opportunity for the Opies to enter the frame. From the Wellcome, a short walk takes you to another Opie site and a different side of Bloomsbury. Among the papers in the Opie Archive, I uncovered a letter to my grandfather from the publisher Michael Joseph, dated January 1939, asking for a photograph and biographical information to assist in the promotion of his first book, *I Want to Be a Success* (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 282). The publisher's address stands out. The first thing I notice is the postcode, WC1E. Then I see the first line: 26 Bloomsbury Street. Immediately, I know more or less exactly where that is: the address on the letter must be somewhere close to where Bloomsbury Street intersects with Great Russell Street, less than 15 minutes' walk from the Wellcome Collection.

The letter places Peter Opie in a very specific place and time in relation to Bloomsbury and the London literary world of the 1930s. Assuming he visited his publisher's offices, this means that my grandfather was walking the same streets in the 1930s that I am walking today. And look at the date on that letter, too. January 1939, just a few months before Bloomsbury switched to a wartime setting. The University of London's Senate House building would have been brand new and highly visible, ready to be commandeered for use as the Ministry of Information during the Second World War. T. S. Eliot was based in the same neighbourhood, at the Faber building on Russell Square. Mass Observation had a presence in the area due to its close work with the Ministry of Information, based at Senate House from 1939 onwards (Hinton, 2013: 128–30).²

I Want to Be a Success is nothing if not a colonial adventure story. In it, a young Peter Opie takes a voyage to India, passing through the Suez Canal (Opie, 1939: 28–32). He reflects on his schooling at Eton (37–89), before arriving to visit his parents at Government House in Mumbai, then Bombay (193–206). While in India he hunts deer with cheetahs and himself hunts and kills a leopard (207). The book is adolescent and naïve, but still demonstrates no evidence of a questioning attitude towards Imperialism, the Empire, and associated mindsets.

On the contrary, there is much in the book to suggest a naturalised enthusiasm and familiarity for Empire and for the people who administer it. The following passage is typical:

[French people] think that Britain and the Empire cannot last more than another thirty years. All French people, wherever I go, seem to think that last bit about Britain. They talk of the self-governing Dominions as separate countries as likely to be enemies of Britain as any other country. They put to no account the strong sentimental bond that there is between us.

(Opie, 1939: 97)

Peter Opie's early writing career bears comparison to that of Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass Observation. A public school boy (Harrow not Eton), Harrisson left education with the aim of establishing himself as a writer and anthropologist, publishing his first work, *Savage Civilisation*, in 1937 when he was just 26. He was just seven years older than Peter. Common to both writers is a tendency to write about the study of aspects of everyday culture in explicitly ethnographic and colonial terms:

The Wilds of Lancashire or the mysteries of the East End were as little explored as the cannibal interior of the New Hebrides, or the head-hunter hinterland of Borneo ... In particular, my experience living among cannibals in the New Hebrides ... taught me the many points in common between these wild looking, fuzzy haired, black smelly people and our own, so when I came home from that expedition I determined to apply the same methods here in Britain.

(in Edwards, 1984: 18)

The language in this passage is quite shocking in its open racism. Its sentiment, however, and the line of equivalence drawn between a wild and untamed 'darkest England' and colonial exoticism is a familiar trope in anthropological writing and is clearly not far away at all from the framing of the Opies' perspective in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Again, we are reminded of the passage highlighted earlier: 'the folklorist and anthropologist can, without travelling a mile from his door, examine a thriving unselfconscious culture ... as unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as little unaffected by it, as is the culture of some dwindling aboriginal tribe living out its helpless existence in the hinterland of a native reserve' (Opie and Opie, 1959: 1–2).

In the 1930s it is very possible that Peter Opie and Tom Harrisson might have passed one another on the street. Both would have had reason to visit Bloomsbury – where Peter Opie’s publisher and the Ministry of Information’s offices were both based. Both would have used the British Museum Library, just a short stroll away. The Opies would later work directly with Mass Observation, too. Iona noted, ‘A letter to the Sunday Times, early [sic] in 1951, brought us a vast number of new correspondents: professors, journalists, Mass Observation, folklorists, children and – most important of all – teachers’ (Opie, 1988: 213). The geographical coincidence helps us to frame similarities in theory, outlook and approach. It seems clear that the two projects share roots not only in an interest in, as Highmore puts it, ‘the ritualistic and totemistic elements of culture still present within industrial society’ (2006: 72), but also in a particular perception of the world, rooted in a public school and colonial mindset.

Keppel Street and Bedford Square

A short walk down Gower Street brings you to the intersection of Gower Street and Keppel Street. A left turn takes you to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, an Art Deco building from the late 1920s. This is a building that embodies certain ideas of health and modernity. And, of course, of Empire. It was one of several Bloomsbury institutions, including the nearby School of Oriental and African Studies, directly established to train up those administering and managing the Imperial project. Around the edges of this building are totem animals, cast in brass: mosquitos, snakes, flies, mongooses. They are cast and secured, embedded in the Portland stone. Also cast in brass here, in a bust in the building’s foyer, is Andrew Balfour (Figure 3.3). This is the man that we encountered a few hundred yards away, sitting to the right of Henry Wellcome. Balfour was the founder and first director of the London School of Hygiene. The bust in the foyer commemorates him as the founding father of the institution, honouring ‘His self-sacrificing labours as Director of this School’ and casting him in a heroic light with a quote from Whitman: ‘Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping, / Pioneers! O pioneers!’

Self-sacrifice is right. After a successful career in Sudan, where he was already displaying signs of exhaustion (Abdel-Hameed, 1997: 40), the effort and stress of stewarding the construction of the new building for the London School of Hygiene was too much. From 1927



Figure 3.3 Andrew Balfour Commemorative Plaque, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. LSHTM Archives. CC BY-SA 4.0.

onwards Balfour suffered from depression and nervous exhaustion, leading to his death from a probable suicide at the age of 57 (Elhadd, 2015: 171). His 1931 obituary in *Nature* suggested that, 'Exhausted and overworked, a nervous breakdown brought his labours to a close in 1929. Though he fought his indisposition with indomitable courage, the enforced inactivity became, as he said himself, a vicious circle which prevented his recovery' (C.M.W., 1931: 280).

Balfour was also a collector. Abdel-Hameed notes:

Balfour was ... fond of collecting and classifying, and of presenting information in museums, which he regarded as 'three dimensional textbooks'. One of his first acts in establishing the WTRLK [Wellcome Tropical Research Laboratory Khartoum] was to assemble a pathology museum. Immediately after his appointment as Director of the Wellcome Bureau for Scientific Research he began establishing a museum for tropical medicine.

(1997: 56)

Here we find an echo not only of Wellcome, but also of Peter Opie. *I Want to Be a Success* also reveals an obsession with collecting. Among the reasons given in that book for 'wanting to be a success', are: 'Greater opportunities to help and do good ... Greater opportunities to have plenty of friends. Greater opportunities to collect' (Opie, 1939: 270–1).

Turning away from the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, a very short walk takes us to Bedford Square. Here can be found the site of the former Bedford College. This is where, influenced by her father, Iona Opie was all set to study botany before the War intervened. She wrote much later that: 'I was going to Bedford College to study botany and be a plant pathologist. Had I not been inspired, as a child, by my father having saved the Egyptian cotton crop?' (1988: 207). If she had been able to realise this ambition, she would have been studying botany just moments away from the School of Tropical Medicine founded by her godfather around 20 years earlier.

We should pause for a moment here to note some remarkable coincidences and overlaps. Iona was, according to her own writing, all set to head off to study botany at an institution less than five minutes' walk away from a major scientific organisation established by her own godfather. That man was an avid collector, as was his employer, Henry Wellcome. Both men had close links to her father. Meanwhile, at an address less than five minutes down the road, her future husband Peter Opie found a publisher for his first book: a colonial coming-of-age

story. Mass Observation, which would later help them in their mass surveys, had close connections with the area. The coincidences and the connections mount up.

It is hard to sense how Iona herself must have felt about this, although the explicit mention of her father as an inspiration in this context signals an awareness on some level of a sense of following in family footsteps. Was Iona aware that there was a bronze bust of her godfather in a building just yards away? Did this seem normal to her? It must surely have influenced her sense of her place and relationship with the scholarly infrastructure surrounding her. Perhaps this helps to explain some of the confidence with which she and Peter set off on their course as amateur, untrained scholars. The Opies begin to look less like eccentric outsiders and more and more (to borrow Ben Highmore's description of Nigel and Judith Henderson) like a 'moderately well-heeled and very well-connected couple' (Highmore, 2006: 71).

British Museum

I head into the warmth and the touristy energy of the British Museum. The old scholarly heart of the British Museum is hidden away now, trapped in aspic at the centre of a rotunda that can't be penetrated even by those who work here. The reading room of the old British Museum is famous as a place of literary encounter and hymned as such in innumerable novels and memoirs. It is also a space where both of my grandparents worked on their research – particularly, it seems, Iona, who came here on the train from Liss at least once a fortnight. This is a place where Iona and Peter came to work in the very early days of their collaborative relationship. Looking back in this time in later life, Iona wrote that:

We enrolled as readers in the British Museum Library, and looked at Hunter's Hallamshire Glossary and other books ... And when the buzz bombs slackened and we were able to return to London, we spent all the time we could in the library. I was an illegal reader, being still under twenty-one.

(Opie, 1988: 208)

Much later, it seems that the British Library (then a part of the British Museum) was also experienced as a space of trauma for Peter Opie. Iona recalled that:

He came to meet me there, and sat down at a desk beside me. Suddenly a look of panic came over his face. He said urgently, 'pack up quickly – I've got to get out of here'. The pressure of working against time all those years ago had obviously caught up with him.

(Opie, 1988: 211)

In her later writings, Iona was explicit about the heavy toll that the life of independent scholarship and professional writing (undertaken on terms dictated by Peter) had taken on both her and her husband, particularly on Peter's health. Overwork, she suggests, was a major factor in his early death from a heart attack at the age of 64. Neatly linking Peter's upbringing and belief in a 'heroic' approach to work to a specific instance of unnecessary and stubborn overwork – shovelling snow from their attic in 1982 – that may have killed him, Iona notes that he 'lived dramatically, an ardent reminder of heroism of every kind' (Opie, 1988: 211). The demonstration of this 'could be, for him, the writing of an almost impossibly large book, or the clearing of a snow filled attic' (Opie, 1988: 211). She goes on to capture something of both the futility and pathos of the end results of this approach in a description of a scene very close to the end of Peter's life. 'When I returned I found him sitting on the stairs, exhausted – a small figure swamped by his father's old raincoat' (Opie, 1988: 211).

Similar stories of 'heroism' are to be found, as noted above, in the lives of Andrew Balfour and indeed of Henry Wellcome, whose marriage suffered as a result of his collecting. Arnold and Olsen note that 'one of the contributory factors to [the Wellcomes'] break up may well have been her dislike of the amount of time he devoted to his collecting activities' (2003: 36). Men and their collections. Men and their projects. Lives marked by rupture, breakups, breakdowns, early deaths.

Here in the British Museum I am aware of being in a colonial space too, of course. Indeed, I'm aware of being in perhaps *the* archetypal colonial space at the heart of Bloomsbury. The galleries here bear witness to the legacies of gentlemen scholars and collectors and their desires to make sense of the world by hoarding fragments of it. On all sides, the plunder and the pillage of Empire. On all sides, the mania of collecting, classifying and hoarding. The mindset of *I Want to Be a Success* is the mindset of this place. The links between hoarding, overwork, manic collecting and nervous breakdowns mirror, in micro, the social damage of the Imperial project; the unhealthy tendency to hang on too long, fight too hard, control too many places, collections, *stuff*.

Coram's Fields

It is time to come up for air and look for something else. Another space and time, another way of doing things. Heading out of the British Museum through its exit on Montague Place, I walk across Russell Square and head towards the Brunswick Centre and Coram's Fields.

Iona didn't, in the end, go to university in Bloomsbury. She didn't attend Bedford College to train as a botanist and didn't get to explore the avenue of life and career that this might have opened up. Nevertheless, she did conduct research in Bloomsbury, and Coram's Fields was one site for this. Coram's Fields is, for me, in many ways, where my current project started. It is where I started to realise that my grandmother and I had a geography in common. You can't get into the park itself without a child in tow, so I walk along the street past the entrance, thinking about the slightly sad atmosphere that hangs around this space and those gates. Now I am sitting and writing these notes on a bench in the gathering dusk of Brunswick Square, just around the corner. Coram's Fields is, as Matthew Ingleby puts it, 'the open space to the North of Lamb's Conduit Street that famously denies access to adults unaccompanied by a child' (2017: 17). Site of the former Foundling Hospital, an orphanage for abandoned children, and named after its extraordinary founder, Captain Thomas Coram, this is the bedrock of a longstanding association between Bloomsbury and childhood. Great Ormond Street Hospital is just a few streets away, and J. M. Barrie drew inspiration for *Peter Pan* from his time living on Brunswick Square, which borders onto Coram's Fields (Ingleby, 2017: 35). Iona used to come here to do fieldwork, she once told me, waiting for unaccompanied children to come along so that she could go inside with them and do some recording – taking her tape recorder there to capture the children's games and songs hidden behind those walls. According to the sound archive at the British Library, this must have been in the 1970s (British Library, shelfmark c898).

Coram's Fields take us back too, to the territory of Highmore's 'Hopscotch modernism'. Bloomsbury is where Nigel Henderson grew up, and he spent his own childhood on Brunswick Square, bordering onto Coram's Fields. In 'Hopscotch modernism', Highmore suggests that Nigel Henderson's documentary practice was driven by a sense of the impermanence and precariousness of everyday life, rooted in part in an enduring fascination with childhood and play. Henderson's traumatic experiences of the destruction of the Second World War, Highmore suggests, resulted in a heightened awareness of the precariousness and preciousness of the

everyday. He suggests that what is captured in Henderson's documentary photographs, including those of children playing hopscotch, is:

the impossibility of taking the everyday for granted: this street, these children, this skipping rope, these roller skates, are here precariously. They might not have been. Here nostalgia points to an impossibility; to return to a time before such street life could have been threatened. The foregrounding of everyday life ... might accord with a re-evaluation of the everyday. What had been insignificant, devalued, is given a new significance and value. Children, family life, the locality, take on a new vividness.

(Highmore, 2006: 74)

We might be reminded again here of the traces of a hopscotch grid on a pavement. These traces are reassuring reminders of tradition, and evidence that new generations are enjoying the same games that you once did. But the traces are only there precariously, impermanent. They are prone to erasure and disappearance. They are only here briefly.

The sound recordings made by Iona Opie in various locations, including Coram's Fields, also capture a curious sense of permanent impermanence. They capture the energy of a moment in time: the noise of the playground, the time-stamped cultural references, the curiosity of an attentive listener. There is a vitality and an essence to these recordings – permanent impermanence (as a record of a fleeting moment) and a playfulness and sense of liberation that is worth dwelling upon.

Julia Bishop (2014, 2018) has written sensitively about the liberation that Iona gained as a researcher and as an individual in escaping from the static research environment of the home/library and in conducting fieldwork:

Over the years, and especially for the volume that became *The Singing Game* (1985), they also expanded their collecting methods to include audio recording ... Iona travelled around the country by car recording children performing songs and singing games, and talking about their play ... Iona enjoyed talking to the children and found this kind of research much more conducive.

(Bishop, 2019 [2014]: 32)

Iona herself wrote about the pressures of the strictness and regimented nature of the husband-and-wife working arrangement that was dictated

by Peter: 'no one was more in need of a willing slave than Peter' (Opie, 1988: 208). The passage above, however, gives an evocative sense of a female researcher travelling around the British Isles, including to some of its furthest-flung corners, finding freedom in conducting research and escaping from the grip of a disciplinarian working marriage. Iona herself articulated this in 1998, stating that 'I was free to go around the country mopping up the places where we had not had any contributors, all the little corners, like Land's End and Cape Wrath and the Isle of Wight, and so forth' (Opie, 2014: 203).

Once again, this is very different to the hermetic research world created in the Opie home, and points to a very different side to her character and work. Iona would capture some of this sense of freedom and independence in her own book *The People in the Playground*. Based around observations of the village school in Liss, this is a rhythmic book that follows the cycles and seasons of the year. It feels like this was the natural culmination of a lifetime's project: a book of observation and human response to what was seen rather than a collection and pasting of things. This is a more literary work. A poetic book, even.

In *The People in the Playground* Iona writes:

I learned to submerge myself as much as possible in the milling throng. I wrote down, in home-made shorthand, the children's descriptions, comments, and opinions exactly as they expressed them, and their stories and jokes exactly as they told them. Then I hurried home and set it all down before my own impression of the experience had faded.

(Opie, 1993: vii)

She notes again, in another passage: 'I wanted, above all, to call up the sensation of being surrounded by the kaleidoscopic vitality of the eager, laughing, shouting, devil-may-care people in the playground' (Opie, 1993: ix).

It is perhaps in *The People in the Playground* that some of the tensions and problems observed throughout this chapter come closest to being 'resolved'. As Iona's one solo book and final major published work, it looks and feels the most modern, despite drawing largely on diary content written during the 1970s. Iona emerges more fully as an author in this book and presents a mode of observation, working and writing work that feels far freer of the taxonomising, ethnographic impulses found in earlier Opie works. This is a book that takes us out of the museum and into the 'kaleidoscopic vitality' of the playground. It is

also a book that moves us away, albeit quite subtly, from the 'heroic' or 'great man' traditions of work, collecting and authorship outlined above. Conceptually, we might say, it is a book that feels more aligned with Coram's Fields than the British Museum or the Wellcome Collection.

And here I am, too, sitting on a bench in Coram's Fields. This is the end of my walk today. I am sitting watching some children running around the park and watching Christmas lights get brighter in the Brunswick Centre across the road as the sky dims down and night approaches. I am thinking about my grandmother, and I am feeling sad that she isn't around. Memories, voices, associations collide. A time telephone, indeed, but the wires are crossed.

Walking in the footsteps of my grandparents, and following the threads of their connections to Bloomsbury, has been revealing. From the dark cases and esoteric collections of the Wellcome, to the 'heroic' institutional spaces of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the British Museum, to this spot out in the open, surrounded by life, I have a sense of a shifting focus around ideas of what writing, observing and 'research' might involve. Sitting here, on this bench in the heart of Bloomsbury, is the right place for me to draw this investigation to a close. It allows me to end by thinking of Iona, my grandmother, as an observer, quietly watching the children in the playground playing over the years.

That is the image and the thought to end on: an observer on a bench, making notes, watching children, thinking about lives that have passed, and other lives that could have been.

Notes

- 1 The Opie Archive online repository gives a sense of the range of materials that the Opies had to draw upon here. A search of the archive for 'hopscotch' yields 31 results, from places as far afield as Ipswich and Aberdeen: <https://www.opiearchive.org>
- 2 A little later, in 1943, Mass Observation would establish an office at 21 Bloomsbury Street, just across the road from the offices of Michael Joseph (Hinton, 2013: 303).

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Half-belief and ‘belief play’ in the haunted primary school: children’s supernatural play in a digital era

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Phantasmagorical tales

This chapter takes as its focus an aspect of the Repertoire node in the Circuit of Play described in [Chapter 1](#): stories contributed by, and co-produced with, schoolchildren during the Playing the Archive project (2017–19) and the earlier, related project, Children’s Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age (2009–11) (see Burn, [2014](#), for further details), to explore how children playfully communicate about, perform, and comment on supernatural legends and beliefs in the modern primary school playground. Such stories may be categorised as ‘phantasmagorical’ by Sutton-Smith ([1997](#)), a term he coins to express the entire gamut of imaginary potentiality among children, including what adults regard as ‘irrational, wild, dark, or deep play’ ([1997](#): 151).

The experiences described and unpacked in the vignettes below take inspiration from ‘belief legends’, a category of story familiar to folklorists, in this case concerning ghosts and supernatural figures, and their sister form ‘memorates’, personal stories of supernatural experience (Dégh and Vázsonyi, [1974](#); cf. Bennett, [1987](#)). Belief legends, as the name implies, are third-person stories set in the ‘real world’, which turn on one or more beliefs, such as the existence of supernatural figures, or the ability of the dead to visit the living or to wreak vengeance for wrongdoing on the living. They often arise in conversation and may take a multitude of forms, from brief, vague or fragmentary references to more elaborate tellings and, further, to polyphonic tellings to which several people contribute as part of a conversation. Both legends and memorates

may express belief or disbelief or ambiguity, and they generally have the effect of instigating debate about belief among those present (Dégh, 2001).

Children's stories of the supernatural

'Ghost stories' as told by children can take a number of different forms and are not uniformly belief legends, which have hitherto been associated with adolescents or teenagers. The American folklorist Sylvia Grider characterises children's ghost stories as 'among the most popular and most durable traditional narratives in the United States' (2007: 111). The kinds of stories she exemplifies as being told by elementary school-aged children, however, are 'formulaic and often silly' and 'are usually quite short, monoepisodic, and conclude with an incongruous and jokelike punchline' (Grider, 2007: 111), which keeps 'the terror of the supernatural and the perverse under control by humor and parody' (2007: 117). Thus, children's 'favourite ghost stories involve liberal doses of fantasy and imagination rather than direct confrontation with the horrible, unknown, and unknowable' (2007: 117). Examples include a version of 'Johnny, I Want My Liver Back', in which the teller builds up the suspense and finishes by shouting or screaming and/or grabbing one of their audience to create a jump-scare ending. Others include a twist of a different kind by ending in a pun or a joke. Such stories are known as 'spookies' by the Opies, who point to the atmospheric settings in which they are told and associated pranks and practices (1959: 35–6). This is elaborated still further by Leea Virtanen, describing the ways in which the Finnish children she worked with 'look for a place where they won't be disturbed by adults' in order to create the necessary 'thrilling surroundings' for their performances and to experience fear in a pleasurable and controlled way (Virtanen, 1978: 73–5).

These third-person stories are not, however, the same as belief legends. They are rather performed and apprehended as scary fictions, with generic characters usually operating in a generic world, placing them in the realm of what folklorists term *Märchen* or wonder tales.¹ The suggestion that this might have happened, or could happen – that this might be true – is absent.

Grider distinguishes between these two kinds of stories, suggesting that 'the genuinely frightening legends about haunted bathrooms in which malevolent beings, such as the infamous Bloody Mary, emerge from the mirrors or stalls of the restroom and literally attack the children

who summon them through play rituals and formulaic chants' are part of the repertoire of slightly older children (2007: 133). Likewise, Wilson's study of teenagers in Britain and Ireland during the early 1990s discovered that their repertoire consisted of belief legends, contemporary legends (also known as 'urban legends' or 'modern legends' because of their emphasis on modern life and technologies but not always supernatural in their focus), traditional ghost tales and personal experience stories (Wilson, 1997). However, the stories we discuss in this chapter were collected from children who were still at primary school and aged between 7 and 10. They were not encountered at all by the Opies at the time of their research in the third quarter of the twentieth century (Armitage, 2006: 14).

We do not have the evidence to judge if this is indicative of a relatively recent trend towards the adoption of belief legends and memorates by pre-teen children. It is nevertheless true that stories which talk about and prompt enactment of summoning rituals which can conjure 'toilet ghosts' (Armitage, 2006) like Bloody Mary (Langlois, 1978; Bronner, 1988; Dundes, 2002), or the spirit of Charlie Charlie (Meder and de Jong, 2018), which traditionally spread orally, have also been transmitted through popular print (Wilson, 2000) and are now increasingly accessible online via the participatory web. In the schools we worked with as part of the Playing the Archive and Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age projects, at least, they also now sit at the interface between the digital and non-digital worlds in the present-day primary school playground. These vignettes, other accounts and researcher reflections permit us to consider what these performances reveal about contemporary children's relationships to the notion of 'belief' itself. The Opies, in their 1959 publication *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, notably used the term 'half-belief', which they applied to a range of child-reported superstitious beliefs, practices and performances around good and ill fortune, omens and luck.

We suggest that this fresh appraisal of the Opies' approach to vernacular belief offers the opportunity to centre the child in their own play incorporating elements of the supernatural, and so move away from occasionally anxious and negative adultist perspectives on phantasmagorical play that can manifest as moral panics. Instead, the fieldwork data discussed in this chapter will demonstrate how children's phantasmagorical play can be intensely space- and place-specific, incorporating motifs recognisable from oral folk tradition, and simultaneously intertwined with broader, more modern and online influences from diverse media such as film, social media apps and platforms such as

YouTube, videogames and online ‘creepypastas’,² superstitious beliefs, practices and performances.

We consider continuities and changes in school-situated folklore in the digital age, and in what ways the digital is informing children’s playful expressions around belief; furthermore, we consider how digital play and popular media influences may in fact lead to children’s personalisation and curation of ‘assemblages’ of beliefs, and we introduce the concept of ‘belief play’ to explain how children’s performances can function as meta-commentaries on the nature of belief, particularly in the presence of fieldworkers during participatory research.

The Opies and children’s ‘half-belief’

The Opies’ first publication drawing directly on contributions from their school-based surveys of children’s play, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), features children’s accounts of their vernacular beliefs and associated practices, some of which, such as apotropaic or protective practices, could be described as ‘superstitions’ in popular parlance. However, the couple state that they were alert to the pejorative implications of this term regarding sincerity – or the apparent lack of this – in belief. They write that ‘it may be remarked that when a practice or omen is termed a “superstition” it is generally one which is not believed in by the person referring to it’ (Opie and Opie, 1959: 210) and indicate that this perception informed their data-gathering: ‘When collecting this lore from children we have not asked for “superstitions” as such, but have inquired after “magical practices” they knew, or asked for their ‘ways of obtaining luck or averting ill luck’ (1959: 210).

This is not entirely the case. The Opies’ four main questionnaires, which the Playing the Archive team worked with during the project, indicate that the Opies did use the term ‘superstition’ from time to time when asking children about their customs and beliefs – for example, asking whether they know any ‘sayings or superstitions’ or ways of fortune telling using everyday items including bus tickets and cigarette packets, and also asking for any ‘games, customs, or superstitions’ involving spitting or kissing in Questionnaire II (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 14). Similarly phrased questions featuring the term ‘superstition’ are to be found in Questionnaire III (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 30). However, the Opies also used more neutral phrasing with questions that

omitted the term, asking children in Questionnaire III about what ‘signs’ intimating good or bad luck they might encounter on their way to school, and specifically as to whether they knew any charms, curses or ways of telling the future. Nevertheless, the Opies’ consideration suggests that they were bringing a nuanced critical awareness to children’s beliefs, acknowledging that practice, or performance, did not denote unquestioning acceptance (or complete denial) and that children had various reasons or motivations for performing a belief-related customary action, hence the Opies’ adoption of the term ‘half-belief’.

The Opies did not coin the term, however. Campbell (1996: 157–8) credits McKellar (1952: 320) with putting forward the concept ‘to refer to a given type of norm governing belief’ whereby a ‘superstition’ might still be acted upon despite the actor (of any age in this instance) rationally rejecting its premise. We cannot be certain whether the Opies were familiar with McKellar’s idea when they employed the term, but this teasing apart of action from wholesale belief opens the way for acknowledging other drivers informing children’s performances, which the Opies mention. While they note children’s ‘simple faith’ in vernacular beliefs (1959: 208–10) deriving from broader notions of child development pre-dating the Opies’ work, the couple also identified alternative motivations for children’s employment of the folklore around them.

They suggest that it is in children’s ‘nature’ to ‘be attracted by the mysterious’ and they allow for degrees of belief, noting that charms might be observed by children because ‘they also feel that there “may be something in it”’ (1959: 208–10). However, they also observe children may perform customary practices purely for amusement, or because their peers are doing likewise. Particularly notable is their remark that children’s beliefs are not wholly random but, on closer consideration, pertain to good and bad luck, and to protecting themselves (1959: 208–10). Their chapter on ‘half-belief’ is largely concerned with securing luck and spotting omens; charms are discussed in a separate section of the book on ‘curiosities’, while, as noted above, scary rhymes and stories appear in a chapter entitled ‘Just for Fun’ as ‘spookies’ for entertainment, as mentioned previously.

A further facet of belief as observed by the Opies for children is the quality of newness: ‘It is something just learnt, and often excitingly full of possibility for [the child’s] ... immediate welfare’ (1959: 213). For the Opies, then, we can suggest that children’s half-belief as expressed is in a sense sensory, embodied in experience and performance, and multimodal. The examples they cite involve sight, touch, the body, the

emotions, and the child's physical environment and materials such as found or observed objects, humans and creatures, and involve novelty and possibility.

Nigel Kelsey, a teacher-collector of children's folklore during the early 1980s and to some extent in the preceding two decades (Alton and Widdowson, 2019: xi), found the Opies' usage of 'half-belief' to be 'a very useful term which covers a wide range of practices, rituals, sayings and beliefs'. He goes on to make the point that, while to his mind some of the beliefs arise from children's peer cultures, others are picked up from adults, becoming 'muddled up and changed in the process' (Kelsey, 2019: 527). What Kelsey is explicit about is that half-belief is not confined to children, observing that adult investment in vernacular belief is also variable and can range from conviction to dismissal, which, in turn, informs children's own degrees of belief (2019: 528).

Supernatural and subversive cultural influences in a digital age

Writing in 1954, Peter Opie drew a relationship between popular culture and folklore, observing that 'folklore is not something archaic, which is being left behind' (1954: 152) and citing beliefs connected with 'the radio, film stars, football pools' to contend that 'the most lore is likely to be found in the activities which are the most popular' (1954: 162), while Burn comments that the Opies had an 'eclectic approach to the influences of playground lore':

One of the insights of the Opies' work was to look beyond earlier assumptions that the culture of the playground was purely a folkloric culture. While their dominant interest was, perhaps, in the traditions of oral culture, and to the folkloric elements of playground games and songs, they also recognised that children drew inventively on anything that came to hand, including their media cultures.

(Burn, 2012: 2)

This chapter advances this discussion, drawing on play research and more recent folklore studies scholarship to suggest that any distinction between folkloric and media cultures is fuzzy at best within the realm of children's play. Marsh and Bishop (2014) have argued that, while the blending of a range of cultural resources in the manner of bricolage has

long been a characteristic of children's folklore, this practice has become intensified in the digital age, and this is one of the things that makes the play of contemporary children different from earlier childhoods. Meanwhile, the ubiquity of the digital and the creation of digital spaces where 'teens ... hang out with their friends – occupying a similar role to the mall, movie theatre, or arcade in decades past' (Peck, 2020: 7), as well as the highly visual nature of digital culture, has made day-to-day habitual ways of living acutely visible, says Peck, observing that this 'visibility carries implications not only for vernacular expression but also for institutional influence' across digital communities (2020: 11) and for folkloric transmission. As Tucker observes, 'Online performance has become such a popular pursuit in youth culture that it now belongs to everyday life, where legends and other expressive forms frequently get people's attention' (Tucker, 2011: 46).

Peter Opie's observation above perhaps indicates that media or popular culture influences on children's play are nothing new, which the Opie Archive itself bears witness to. But it has not always been welcomed by adults. This extends to contemporary media cultures now intertwined with the digital. In the 1950s, at the time of the Opies' first questionnaires, the UK was experiencing a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2002) around American-style 'horror comics', resulting in the 1955 Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act (Barker, 1984: 5). These adult anxieties can be seen reflected in children's responses to the Camberwell Public Libraries Essay Competition on the subject, preserved as part of the Opie Archive. 'Lot [sic] of comics are issued which are not fit for children. On the front cover there is usually a horrible picture', wrote one girl entrant. 'Although these comics are not suitable for children children often read them' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 35 fol. 299v). Another 10-year-old child asks of the publishers: 'do they no what [sic] how dangerous the comics they publish are to the minds of timid and nervours [sic] children?' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 35 fol. 310r). The child recounts a tale of how, a few weeks earlier, performing what folklorists would consider 'ostension', specifically 'legend tripping' (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983), had it occurred, children had 'swarmed into a cemetery hunting for a salamander ... which lived among the bones of dead people' and according to rumour had been eaten by the creature.³

Fast forward to the present, and the perceived influence of digital media content on children is still giving cause for adult concern. Tucker writes of the 'global moral panic' (2020: 211–14) around

internet-communicated lore, such as dangerous pranking supposedly prompting children and teens to undertake increasingly risky challenges, and also Slender Man – an online creation and example of the folkloresque⁴ (Foster and Tolbert, 2016) who did not, Tucker notes, go global, but was implicated in an attempted murder by two pre-teen girls in the United States (Tucker, 2020: 212). We can suggest that adult fears are concentrated around children encountering and acting on folkloric or folkloresque mediated beliefs and belief legends that are particularly subversive or tinged with horror, and this in turn circles back to the question of belief. Yet, when Koven conducted a survey of knowledge of and belief in Slender Man, receiving many responses from teenagers, he remarks that he ‘did not predict such an overwhelming *disbelief* in the story’ (2018: 116). He continues: ‘there may have been some initial belief in the veracity of Slender Man among the younger “kids”, but popular culture oversaturation as well as the high rates of pop cultural literacy in teenagers quickly dispels that belief’ (2018: 117–18).

Roud (2010: 452–3) also suggests that contemporary children are adept at distinguishing between the real and the fantastic due to oversaturation within popular culture, proposing that ‘it may be that the daily exposure to the fictional world of magic has, in effect, taken the magic out of it for children by desensitising them, so that most of them are well aware that magic really is fiction’. However, Roud adds that adolescent belief, especially relating to the ‘occult’, can take on an appearance of being ‘much stronger than children’s, perhaps because it has a counter-cultural element’. This section has dealt with what adults think about children’s ‘belief play’, but what do children themselves have to say?

Children telling belief legends: performing the supernatural

Vignette 1: The Green Lady

I was introduced to the Green Lady during my first visit to the school playground. Seven-year-old Nadia gave a tour of the space, pointing out features such as the climbing frame, king ball markings and football pitch. Just as matter-of-factly she told me, ‘and some people say that’s where the Green Lady lives’, pointing to the empty caretaker’s house at the edge of the playground.

Over the visits that followed, I learned more about the Green Lady and her supposed whereabouts. When I asked who the Green Lady was and what she was like, children variously told me

‘scary’, ‘bad’, ‘terrifying’, ‘crazy’, ‘mysterious’ and ‘magic’. Some children told me she lived in ‘the attic’, pointing to the tall tower of the Edwardian school building that loomed over the playground. Others said she could be found in the school toilets (and was responsible for their smell). Although I was told that she disappears when people enter, one child said they had seen her footprint in the toilets. Another child told me she had once asked if anyone was in there, with someone calling back, ‘It’s the Green Lady!’

Despite reporting that they had heard her, smelled her, found her footprints or seen objects she had moved around the playground, no one confirmed having seen the Green Lady herself. Some of the children hinted at suspicion, with one child saying that ‘some people think she’s really real’, but others seeming less sure.

A teaching assistant told me, ‘Oh yeah, they all talk about the Green Lady’, confirming that she was well-known throughout the school. The Green Lady also seemed to have been a feature of the school for some time. My co-researcher John Potter, who taught at the school in the 1990s, remembered stories about the Green Lady from his time teaching there some 25 years earlier.

This vignette, drawn from Kate Cowan’s field experiences, describes how members of our research team encountered apparent beliefs in a ‘Green Lady’⁵ during the Playing the Archive project research in a London school, where ‘she’ resided in various liminal spaces including the toilets. While the children do not refer to her specifically as a ghost here, in his 2006 article on the ‘toilet ghost story’, Armitage observes that the toilet ghost is ‘surprisingly common’, not only in the UK but across the globe. Examples from his own case studies in British schools indicate that, he writes, ‘it was well known among the middle years’ children at the school (aged from around 8 to 12 years) and concerns a ghost, predominantly female, generally inhabiting the female toilets and sometimes linked to a specific cubicle’. Sometimes named after a colour, such as the White Lady – ‘in the British Isles ... the most commonly adopted name for the toilet ghost’ (Armitage, 2006: 6) – or Green Lady, or Bloody Mary, the toilet ghost can be a frightening figure who makes her presence known or who can be summoned using a mirror (Armitage, 2006: 6–8).

To find out more about this specific ‘Lady’, recalls Cowan, we gave children handheld voice recorders at playtimes and encouraged them to interview one another, including asking each other what they knew about the Green Lady. We found out about rituals for summoning her: ‘When you say in the night – you say um – “Green Lady, Green Lady,

Green Lady” three times in the bathroom I think, and then she will appear and it’s like magic.’

This, says Cowan, seemed to remind the children of other similar stories and practices. One child shared:

The Green Lady lives in the attic and Bloody Mary lives in the bathroom, the girls’ one ... When you say ‘Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary’ three times in the mirror in the night in the bathroom she comes out, and if you say ‘Blue Baby, Blue Baby, Blue Baby’ three times in the night he comes out and he goes heavy and then he kills you.

(HPHC2018-06-14at023)

Another child gave more details:

It’s really scary. At night, you have to say ‘Blue Baby’ and then a baby comes up in your hands and there’s blood all over it. And then Bloody Mary you have to say ‘Bloody Mary’ three times. All of the lights have to be off all around the house, and in the house, and you can only have candles, and you can die from it.

(HPKC2018-06-14vt001)

The above data demonstrate a blending of common belief legends: of a female supernatural being taking the moniker of a colour,⁶ and ‘Bloody Mary’, described by Dundes (2002: 77) as a ritual whereby ‘a child, almost always a girl, goes into a bathroom at night (or at school in the dark) and repeats the name Mary in some form which supposedly results in a frightening creature named Mary emerging out of the bathroom mirror’. First brought to attention by Langlois in 1978 as a ‘game’ (Dundes, 2002: 78) to summon ‘Mary Whales’ (Langlois, 1978), and linked to urban or contemporary legends such as the ‘Vanishing Hitchhiker’ (Dundes, 2002: 79–80; cf. Dégh, 2001: 243–6), the ritual is common to preadolescents but, according to Tucker (2005), not limited to them. Tucker encountered examples and variants of mirror rituals known and performed across genders and among older young people such as college students in the United States.

Co-author Julia Bishop, a researcher on the Children’s Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age project, also heard accounts from Key Stage 2 children at a Sheffield primary school in 2009 of the boys’ toilets being haunted, with several children running off there and then to summon the ghost and returning to report that they’d seen it, or

rather 'her' (Bloody Mary) (Bishop fieldnotes from 12 November 2009). Girls in Year 3 and Year 4 at the same school also informed Bishop that some had seen Bloody Mary in the girls' toilets after performing a summoning ritual (MPJB2009-11-12at00103).

The above descriptions from children demonstrate the social and group-performative elements of this belief. However, in the case of the London children, this took on a dramatic, meta-performative dimension as children also acted out an 'interview' with their school's unusual inhabitant (see also [Chapter 5](#)). The following transcript of the interview features four children:

Anastasia: Today we want to do an interview with the Green Lady.
'Hello, Green Lady.'

Libby: Hello.

Anastasia: Oh, I paused it [laughs]. Tell me, Green Lady, what did you do today?

Libby: Er, I don't really know.

Anastasia: [Quietly] You say, 'Oh, what I had for lunch – blood'

Libby: Ok, you asked what I had for lunch? Blood.

Anastasia: What! I didn't ask her –. Ah! She's running away. We have to get the Green Lady. We've even found the actual Green Lady, and today we are gonna meet her. You're gonna be so excited, everybody, to see the Green Lady. She's running. You can't see her because she's invisible. I'm wearing these invisibility glasses. They're invisible too.

Libby: Pretend you didn't recognise me.

Anastasia: Green Lady! Green Lady. Green Lady, what did you have for dinner? (Quietly) Can you say, 'Oh, I had the same thing for breakfast – blood'.

Libby: I had cauliflower.

Anastasia: What did you have for dinner?

Libby: Er, you asked me what I had for breakfast? The same. Blood.

Anastasia: [Whispers] With cauliflower.

Libby: Huh? Cauliflower.

Anastasia: Oh! Cauliflower. She eats cauliflower with blood. Ok! ... There's someone following me. And the Green Lady's following me too. Oh no. It's one of my fans. There's a fan right under here. Fan! Greatest fan! What's your name?

Amira: My name's [Amira] and I know everything about the Green Lady.

Anastasia: Tell me about her. [Quietly] Can you say she's standing right next to you?

Amira: She's right.

Anastasia: [Screams] Green Lady, how are you? Are you gonna eat some blood?

Amira: Yes.

Anastasia: Oh no! [Screams] Run! I never knew the Green Lady ate blood. I haven't even watched the Green Lady on Scooby Doo but it must be- [screams, then laughs]. Help! [Sounds of running] Finally. Away from the Green Lady. I don't feel good. Green Lady's been chasing me. I'll go back to the perfect spot. I like this spot in the pirate ship. I can feel the Green Lady but not really see her ... Who? Who are you? The Green Lady! [Screams] She's gonna eat me. The Green Lady swears to eat me. The Green Lady swears to eat me! [Whispers] You have to chase me, then you have to grab me and go 'bleuraahh'. [Screams] I'm not a fast runner, you know. I'm like a chicken. [Screams] I'll hide here.

Libby: Bleuraahh!

Anastasia: Oh I don't feel good. I think I got poison in me. Bye. [Dramatic voice] Recording over.

Vignette 2: Charlie Charlie

A group of older girls aged 9 to 10 at the same London school described to Kate Cowan other rituals or challenges, including 'The 3 a.m. Challenge' (dares and challenges completed in the night when 'it's gonna be creepier because that's the devil's time'), and candlelight summoning rituals such as 'Midnight Man'. The children did not talk about participating in these practices themselves but spoke about having watched videos about them on YouTube or of other people playing them. One game which some of the children did seem to have participated in was the Charlie Charlie challenge:

Mia: So you take a pencil, two pencils, stack them on top of a piece of paper so that there's four columns. Each column says yes or no ...

Zahra: So apparently Charlie Charlie's a ghost, and if you say something – if you say, 'Charlie Charlie are you there?'

then it's gonna spin around and then if it stays on 'yes' that means he's there ... and when you end the game you have to say 'Goodbye Charlie' or Charlie's gonna still be there.

Kate: Where did you hear about that from?

Mia: Everybody does it. Everybody used to do it in Year 4.

Zahra: I tried it once and it went to 'yes' and then I said 'Goodbye Charlie'.

The Charlie Charlie Challenge, an international craze that, according to Meder and de Jong (2018: 10) 'started to go viral worldwide through social media' in 2015, was given a more local connection:

Zahra: Oh I know the story of Charlie Charlie, how he became the ghost. So it was somewhere in the school.

Kate: This school?

Zahra: Yeah, I think, because I heard it. He went to the top of the school. The top. Right on the top [points to the tower of the school building]. And then there was someone there and then he took Charlie and then he turned into a ghost. And then I think Charlie Charlie still lives up there somewhere. That's what I've been hearing. People told me and I just heard it.

One of the children present suggested that Charlie 'fell off a building', which was tentatively corroborated by another child who told those present, 'I heard people say it.'

Bricolage, glocalisation and folklore

Marsh and Bishop (2014: 156) argue that:

Pieterse, in considering the notion of hybridity in relation to cultural syncretism, the mixing of people from diverse cultures, suggests that 'A distinctive feature of contemporary times is that they are times of *accelerated mixing*. Thus, it is not mixing that is new but the scope and speed of mixing' (2001: 231, author's italics). Likewise, we would like to propose that, in relation to children's play, in the twenty-first century there can be discerned a process of intensified bricolage. This is preferential to a notion

of acceleration, as that denotes a time-based analysis, a speeding up of bricolage, which, certainly, may be taking place due to technologies but is not the sole characteristic of the changes. Instead, intensified bricolage points to the way in which some play texts, in some contexts, are now more laminated, that is multi-layered, due to the complexities of the textual landscapes of contemporary childhood. Localized practices are now conflated with the global in ways that were not possible in previous generations because of the way in which digital technologies accelerate and extend the 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995) process.

In the above playful interviews these processes of bricolage and glocalisation are evident as the participating children draw on folkloric knowledge and media experiences including the structure of the TV or radio news interview while using an actual digital recording device to put the spectre on the spot in an ostensive dramatic performance (cf. Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983). While Bloody Mary is not directly mentioned, the Green Lady's bloody diet suggests an intertextual blending of traditions and the international made local to the school setting. The child performing the interview also makes a humorous reference to the children's cartoon *Scooby Doo*, in which the characters pursue and debunk ghosts, although the game of chase that the interview segues into sees the Green Lady as the chaser. The children's knowledge in this school was also informed by social media and digital play. The researcher, curious to know where the children had heard of the Bloody Mary and Blue Baby rituals, was told 'on YouTube'.

The children also mentioned horror films they knew, such as 'Chucky' [from the film *Child's Play*] and *Annabelle* and *It* and a survival videogame called *Granny* (part of the Slendrina franchise informed by Slender Man), which a child explained could be played on a tablet, watched on YouTube or recreated in non-digital ways on the playground. When asked by Cowan's co-researcher Andrew Burn how the game is played in 'real life', interestingly a child reported: 'You do like the same things.' Taken together, the interview is relating aspects of belief legends while also acting as a commentary on and play about belief with its mixing of online and offline lore and tropes, and dramatic faux-fearful reactions to the Green Lady.

In the case of the Charlie Charlie challenge, there is once again a localising of a wider phenomenon, an attempt to summon a spirit according to Meder and de Jong (2018) to answer questions posed by the summoners before being dismissed. Meder and de Jong (2018: 4)

observe that Charlie Charlie is like other summoning rituals such as Bloody Mary and the use of Ouija boards (cf. Tucker, 2012), which are ‘preferably played in the evening or at night, or, in the case of Charlie Charlie, occasionally at 3 a.m. specifically’. This observation may relate Charlie Charlie to the internet-situated practice of The 3 a.m. Challenge, ‘a YouTube video fad in which participants attempt to perform a specific task at 3 in the morning such as calling strangers on the phone, because it is said that the devil is at his strongest at this hour of the day’ (Antonioni and Farci, 2018: 190). For the children of the London school, Charlie Charlie, like the Green Lady, is assigned a liminal space in their locality, the top of the school, where he became a ghost, personalising and locating a global phenomenon in their everyday space.

Notably, all the examples discussed are group or collective performances where tradition meets spontaneity as the children together co-construct a telling of a belief legend drawing on personal knowledge of space, sensory experiences, past or prior play, ritual structures and interactions with media. Cowan recalls that, during fieldwork, the thrill, excitement and fear of these stories and rituals were palpable in the children’s accounts, but the extent to which they believed or half-believed them was less certain, with one child commenting: ‘Like, no one believes in it, but if you do it you get really scared for no reason. It’s just the feeling.’

Conclusion: ‘belief play’ on and offline

In revisiting the Opies’ usage of half-belief, this chapter has moved away from questions of sincerity in belief and action (which the Opies recognised was nuanced and complex) and even from questions of specific motivators for sharing and enacting vernacular beliefs. Instead, it has turned its focus towards the ‘how’ of ‘belief play’ – that is, how contemporary phantasmagorical play is informed and performed with the acknowledgement of the influences of media and the digital. What is apparent is children’s creativity in fusing online and offline elements of tradition and belief legend, personalising and playing with belief legends in the moment, making a game of ostension and enacting metacommentary on standard expected reactions to horror and to frightening figures.

Biswell homes in on this communal performativity in relation to children’s horror-themed storytelling, observing that:

in both the schoolyard and digital environments, what becomes clear is the importance of performativity as shared action by all the

participants rather than just the storyteller. It is the responsibility of the storyteller to be authoritative in their presentation of the story to keep it convincing and immersive regardless of the factuality. (2020: 69)

Biswell also observes that in both online and offline spaces there are also prescribed reactions or ‘appropriate dramatic responses’, be it the click of a ‘like’ button or in-person affect (2020: 69).

We can suggest that rather than depersonalising belief legends, media encountered by the children are made more personal by them: they localise traditions outside their immediate setting and fuse the global and the local in their play, and find opportunities to further embellish and speculate around a legend by drawing on spaces and experiences they are familiar with. Furthermore, we suggest that the above data demonstrate that, to whatever extent children do or don’t believe in the legends they relate, or however susceptible adults posit them to be, their contemporary digital literacy affords them a criticality around media and lore which is conveyed through shared performance and ‘belief play’.

Notes

- 1 As Grider goes on to explain, for example, ‘Johnny, I Want My Liver Back’ is a version of ‘The Man from the Gallows’, an internationally distributed tale type, designated by the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) number 366 (Uther, 2004). Another branch of this tale type is ‘The Golden Arm’, noted by the Brothers Grimm among others (‘Der Mann vom Galgen’, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, vol. 3 [Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterich’schen Buchhandlung, 1856], p. 276), where it appears as a ‘fragment’. There is also a version published by Addy in 1897 which was told to him by an 18-year-old from Wakefield, Yorkshire, and is about a young girl and a pair of gloves. Addy comments, ‘It is hoped that this tale will not be reprinted in any book intended for children’ (1897: 393).
- 2 Blank and McNeill (2015: 5) define creepypasta as ‘an emergent genre of Internet folklore that involves the creation and dissemination of a particular style of creative horror stories and images’. The Slender Man character arose from this genre.
- 3 The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Eve Woodall, a student on the University of Sheffield’s SURE (Sheffield Undergraduate Research Experience) scheme in 2021 who researched and catalogued some of the Camberwell Essays pertaining to horror comics in the Opie Archive.
- 4 Foster (2016: 5) describes the folkloresque as ‘popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore’.
- 5 Project researchers share some of these stories from our data in the BBC Radio 4 programme ‘The Green Lady in the Toilets’, broadcast on 29 December 2020 and available via BBC iPlayer: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000mj1m>
- 6 Armitage (2006: 10) notes that prior research into the White Lady indicated that ‘there was often a mother and child element to the stories (Haward, 1973: 16). Further, Janet Langlois (1978) suggested in her paper that the origins of the story she collected might be based on a local legend called “La Llorona”, which is further based on the story of a woman who weeps for the loss of her children whom she herself has murdered.’

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Part II

Capturing play

Research as play

Kate Cowan, John Potter and Valerio Signorelli

The legacy of the Opies: methodology and methods

While much attention is rightly given to the rich content of the Opies' meticulous collections, their pioneering approach to collecting also deserves recognition, as Bannister, Bishop and Somerset-Ward demonstrated in [Chapter 2](#). Having had no formal research training and conducting their work largely outside of academia, Iona Opie remarked that although she was often asked about their methodology, at the time of conducting their studies 'we did not even know the word "methodology"' (Opie, [2014](#): 200).

Despite, or perhaps *because of* their distance from formal research, the Opies developed their own inventive and informal yet rigorous system of working. This included distributing questionnaires to schools and asking teachers to collect children's written accounts of the games they played. The collection is based on contact with an estimated 20,000 children throughout the British Isles since 1951 (Opie, [2001](#)). After the death of Peter Opie in 1982, Iona continued their work and developed it further with visits to school playgrounds, using a tape recorder to make audio recordings as well as documenting weekly visits to her local primary school throughout the year (Opie, [1993](#)).

The Opies' approach was remarkable in many ways, not least for giving serious interest and attention to children's day-to-day play activities. They responded to a dismissal, still witnessed today, of play as an unimportant digression from more apparently worthwhile activities. They addressed a commonly held concern that children do not play games anymore, or that they no longer play the 'old' games remembered by adults. Similar views were expressed by teachers we encountered

during the Playing the Archive project, some 65 years later. The Opies were often told that children had lost the power to entertain themselves thanks to the then ‘new’ technologies such as cinema, radio and television, with similar fears being raised about videogames and social media today. However, they resisted such assumptions and were pioneering in their focus on play as a living and evolving aspect of culture, worthy of attention and preservation in all its forms.

In order to undertake their investigation, the Opies were also groundbreaking in their positioning of children as play experts. Iona remarked, ‘We decided to do something that had never been done before. We decided to ask the school children themselves’ (Opie, 2014: 199). Earlier studies of play had tended to rely on the authors’ or other adults’ recollections of play in childhood, with many everyday details of games thereby being forgotten (Opie and Opie, 1959). Through focusing on the ordinary, the Opies’ studies were therefore extraordinary, and by positioning children as experts their work is a significant and early example of giving children agency in the production of knowledge concerning childhood culture (Bishop, 2013).

Though they worked outside any formal academic context, the Opies have been located in relation to certain existing research traditions, including the Mass Observation movement (Bishop, 2014), folklore studies and anthropology. Indeed, in a review of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Opie and Opie, 1959), Edmund Leach remarked that ‘The Opies have arrived as anthropologists’ (in Jopson et al., 2014: 33). Meanwhile, Michael Eades observes (in Chapter 3 of this book), how the Opies belong to a ‘sub-tradition of “hopsotch” modernism, ... placing them in an interdisciplinary moment of productive modernist “amateurism”’. Following these threads which the Opies ingeniously combined, we will present our research in this vein of playful ethnography.

Participatory multimodal ethnographies

One strand of Playing the Archive set out to investigate the Repertoire node in the Circuit of Play described by Andrew Burn in Chapter 1. We explored contemporary play practices in light of the Opie collection, building on previous studies such as *Children’s Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age* (discussed in Burn and Richards, 2014). We took central tenets of the Opies’ play-centred and child-centred approach as the starting point for our methodology, while being open to new

research opportunities afforded by digital technologies not available in the Opies' day.

We conducted fieldwork in two UK research sites, with one team based in the north of England in Sheffield and the other (the authors of this chapter) based in London. This chapter draws upon examples from the London fieldwork, which took place in two inner-city primary schools attended by children aged 3 to 11 located in urban areas with high levels of linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic diversity. We visited the schools approximately once per week over half a year, throughout the Spring and Summer terms of 2018. Our research was framed by questions that included:

- What is the nature of children's play in contemporary society?
- What are the key elements of continuity and change in children's play, with particular emphasis on the increasing part played by media cultures?
- How is contemporary play experienced bodily and spatially in playgrounds?
- How might play be captured and represented to account for its dynamic multimodal qualities?

We designed our research around three core methodological principles. First, we drew upon the tradition of ethnography to give careful and committed attention to the everyday activity of play, focusing on perhaps seemingly small and mundane details that constituted children's play cultures. Since we were not able to be embedded in the playground daily, albeit visiting regularly, we were guided by the concept of a 'focused ethnography' (Knoblauch, 2005) in which traditional anthropological methods are adapted to short-term, intensive, regular field visits. This involved spending time in the school playground, observing playtimes and getting to know the day-to-day rules, routines and rituals associated with the players in the school community. Sometimes this involved standing aside, watching the unfolding activity and making fieldnotes, but often the children talked to us about their play and sometimes actively invited us to be part of it – for instance, by teaching clapping games. Over time, we got to know many of the children, the playground, and the most common playtime games, songs, rhymes and other activities, while they got to know us as 'the people interested in play'.

Second, our fieldwork took a participatory approach. In order to address the missing 'insider knowledge' available to ethnographers who are highly immersed in fieldwork settings for very long periods,

we worked in partnership with a core group of children aged between 7 and 11 years old who became both our lead informants and our co-researchers. The children were identified with help from their teachers and were representative of the diversity of the schools overall. Working with this core group of children was a means of giving agency and voice to children in the research process, actively involving them in generating data through several playful, age-appropriate means (Arnott and Wall, 2021). For instance, we encouraged the children to give us tours of their playgrounds, to draw playtimes, to interview one another about their play and to help us interpret what we were seeing. These participatory methods arguably led to a shift in the power relationships usually entailed in research, moving the locus of control away from the researcher and closer to the children (Pahl and Pool, 2011; Flewitt et al., 2018).

Third, this participatory approach was supported through the use of multimodal methods. Multimodality recognises that meaning is made in many forms that include but go beyond language (Kress, 2010), calling for methods that attend to a multitude of visual, audiovisual, embodied and linguistic modes (Cowan, 2014; Jewitt et al., 2016). In addition to ‘traditional’ methods such as interviews, which tend to rely on speech, we invited our child co-researchers to communicate their play experiences in many different ways – for instance, through creating drawings and films of the playground, and through recording video observations that attempted to capture the embodied nature of play. Arguably, such methods are more appropriate to how children communicate, particularly about highly dynamic activities such as play, which may be difficult to articulate verbally or in writing (Cowan, 2020). In this way, the use of multimodal methods offered many avenues for communicating their experiences, and centred the children’s own perspectives through a variety of forms.

While building on the Opies’ child-centred and play-centred approach, our studies took a major departure in terms of using digital technologies not available in the Opies’ day. The majority of the Opie Archive consists of written accounts of play, some with illustrations, and also several audio recordings made by Iona following ‘expeditions’ with her tape recorder, recorded onto three-inch tapes (Bishop, 2014: 214).

In contrast, much of our fieldwork throughout *Playing the Archive* made use of digital audiovisual tools, now often the ‘data collection tool of choice’ for social researchers (Jewitt, 2012: 2). Using a range of devices, we created video recordings of various kinds. For instance, we used iPads to capture observational recordings of play and also

offered these iPads to the children to film tours of their playground. We experimented with the positioning of cameras, filming some playground activity from above to better capture the children's movement through space. We provided the children with small GoPro cameras mounted on chest harnesses to wear when engaging in highly physical play such as football, clapping rhymes and chasing games. We also experimented with using a 360-degree camera to record moments of play 'in the round', so that all actors and actions were visible within one recording. In this way, we attempted to embrace the possibilities of new technologies for capturing play underpinned by the ethos of the Opies.

However, our fieldwork also encountered issues that had not been considered problematic in the Opies' day. For instance, Iona reflected on her visits to schools:

I went round with my little tape recorder. In those days it was quite different because if you went into a town or country village or anywhere, you could hear when the children were out to play ... Then I could stop and just say, 'Could I come into your playground, please?' And the head teachers were just so unalarmed in those days, and usually they would say, 'Well, come in, of course!' and then 'Do you want to keep any of the children? Just help yourself!' (Opie, 2014: 203)

Although light-hearted, this reflection highlights changes in access to schools and security. Our fieldwork required a careful and necessary process of negotiating research permissions and obtaining informed consent (British Educational Research Association, 2018), including from headteachers, parents/guardians and the children themselves. For the children, we provided an adapted consent form that set out the aims of the research in child-friendly terms and explained what participation would involve. Some of the children returned these forms to us having highlighted and ticked activities they were particularly keen to engage in (Figure 5.1), demonstrating not only consent but active assent to the research process (Dockett and Perry, 2011). Each time we invited the children to participate, we reminded them that this was always optional. We were careful to store our data securely, to use pseudonyms for all children, and to only share material in line with parent/guardian and child permissions.

What follows are some examples of ways in which this participatory multimodal ethnography unfolded, reflecting on methodological choices and the insights into play that were gained. It gives insights into our ways

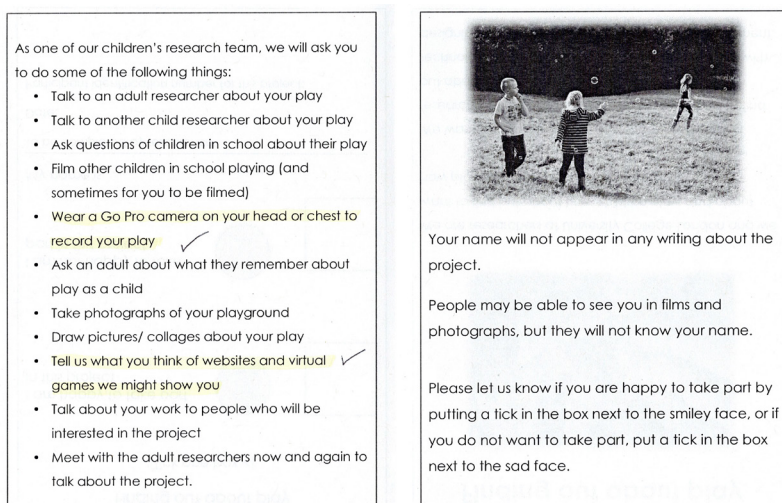


Figure 5.1 Part of the children's consent form, annotated by the child.
© Kate Cowan.

of working, with the findings discussed in more depth in future chapters, including in [Chapter 6](#). We consider in particular the value of weaving play throughout a methodological approach, including our use of playful methods, being attuned to the playful responses of children throughout data collection, and our own playful experimentation with research tools and technologies.

Developing playful methods

Given that the subject of our research was play, and that data collection took place mostly in playgrounds during playtimes and involved young children, it was important to us that the research itself should be playful. This also chimed with our participatory and multimodal research principles, recognising that play gives children agency and facilitates an apt and inclusive form of meaning-making. We therefore employed multiple methods in order to offer the children a range of playful opportunities to participate in ways that we hoped were enjoyable and engaging.

One activity we offered the children was an invitation to create a drawing or map of their playground. We provided drawing materials, A4 paper and an open prompt to 'draw what happens at playtime'. This activity moved away from language-based forms of communication,

from telling to showing, which we hoped might be particularly empowering for the children in our core research group who spoke English as an additional language or experienced special educational needs.

The drawings created in response ranged considerably in both content and design. Some children chose to focus on just one area of particular significance to them. For instance, Riaz was particularly passionate about football and tended to spend his playtimes on the pitch with his friends whenever possible. He reflected this in his drawing (Figure 5.2), choosing to fill the paper with a depiction of the pitch and not including any other elements of the playground (for further discussion of Riaz's football play, see Chapter 6). This highlights his particular interest and experience of playtimes as centrally focused on football.

Some children chose to depict multiple elements in their drawings. For instance, Saira drew a view of the playground looking towards the school building (Figure 5.3). Unlike Riaz's drawing, the football pitch is only one marginal element of the overall composition. She included various features such as hopscotch markings and the school pond, but central to her drawing is a small red house structure. This is positioned prominently in the middle of the paper, bright and intense in its use of colour. In conversations with Saira in the playground, she told us she did not really play at playtime but preferred to just 'hang out' with friends in the small den-like house she chose to depict so centrally, giving an insight into her own particular playtime experience.



Figure 5.2 Riaz's drawing of playtime. © Riaz; used with permission.



Figure 5.3 Saira's drawing of playtime. © Saira; used with permission.

Other children included figures in their drawings that conveyed action in the playground and gave insights into key playtime rules and routines. Harvey's drawing, labelled 'Map of School', takes the bird's eye perspective of looking down on the playground from the school building, showing figures moving between the school's main doorways towards two areas of the playground: the football pitch and climbing frame (Figure 5.4). As these were two of the most popular spaces in the playground, access to them was managed by a rota system set up by the teachers in which different year groups took turns throughout the week. Harvey's drawing depicts this rule in action, showing his understanding and experience of day-to-day playtime routines, and visually highlighting the popularity of two particular areas in the playground.

These diverse responses to the same prompt demonstrate the value of drawing as a research method, using visual modes to offer insights into children's interests and experiences. We found these to be particularly valuable when used alongside the ethnographic observations gleaned from our time in the playground, showing the value of combining multimodal methods with ethnographic perspectives (Kress, 2011). This helped locate these visual texts in a wider play context, with the drawings adding additional details to the 'picture' we ourselves were forming in our ethnographic fieldwork.

Having produced these drawings inside their classrooms, the children suggested that they could also create drawings in the playground during playtime, and requested larger pieces of paper than

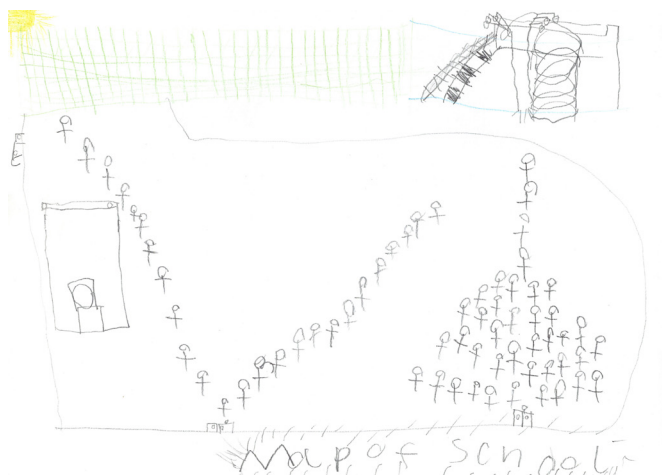


Figure 5.4 Harvey's drawing of playtime. © Harvey; used with permission.

the A4 sheets that had initially been provided. On our following visit, we responded to their suggestion and had large paper and pens available outside at playtime. Several children worked together to create collaborative drawings. In this way, we tried to allow for flexibility in the research process and embraced opportunities to take the lead from our child co-researchers, supporting their ideas for participating in the research.

Another playful data collection method involved sharing items from the Opie collection with the children. We created photocopies of a selection of submissions, featuring the handwriting and drawings of the original young Opie contributors from the 1950s and 1960s. We presented these to children in an old document box and playfully staged a kind of 'unboxing' of the archive, which the children responded to with enthusiasm and interest. We then took the photocopies into the playground and invited the children to try and play the games described by following the rules and instructions. They played games unfamiliar to them, such as the ball game 'Queenie', and games that were somewhat familiar but had different rules, such as variations of chasing games. Of particular interest to us were the ways in which the children infused these older games with new contemporary elements. For instance, while playing a chasing game from the archive that required players to freeze once touched, some of the frozen players began demonstrating 'The Floss', an on-the-spot dance move derived from the videogame *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) that was particularly prevalent during the period of

data collection and had spread rapidly through social media (see also [Chapter 6](#)). In this way, the playful data collection gave insights into several of our research questions, such as change and continuity in play and the influence of media cultures.

We found that utilising playful methods offered rich insights into the children's playworlds, inviting visual and embodied responses, and supplementing more traditional forms of data collection such as observation and interviews. These participatory methods seemed to appeal to the children and have resonances with the subject of the study itself: play. Gratifyingly, the children also showed that they were willing to suggest data collection methods of their own, perhaps made possible by our own playful and flexible approach to the research.

Attuning to play in data collection

During the process of researching with the children, we were struck by several instances of the data collection process itself becoming part of their play. This was perhaps encouraged by the fact that data collection usually happened in the playground during playtimes, where and when the children were already accustomed to playing.

One example was during our use of small handheld audio recorders. We suggested to the children that they might use them to record interviews with each other but had not anticipated the way in which the recorders themselves would become part of their play. For instance, several children initially held the small rectangular recorders to their ears and pretended they were phones, offering insights into their experience of mobile technologies.

Listening back to the recordings, we discovered that some of the children had used the audio recorders to conduct interviews that resembled imaginative play. For instance, Anastasia created a recording with her friend Libby about the school ghost known as the 'Green Lady' (see [Chapter 4](#)). The recording captures the two children engaging in a kind of role-play in which Anastasia pretends she is interviewing the Green Lady, giving Libby directions as to how to act out this character:

Anastasia: Today we want to do an interview with the Green Lady.
'Hello, Green Lady.'

Libby: Hello.

Anastasia: Oh, I paused it [laughs]. Tell me Green Lady, what did you do today?

Libby: Er, I don't really know.
Anastasia: [Quietly] You say, 'Oh, what I had for lunch – blood'
Libby: Ok, you asked what I had for lunch? Blood.
Anastasia: What! I didn't ask her –. Ah! She's running away.

The recording contains excited squeals and screams from both girls as Libby pretends to be the Green Lady and Anastasia acts as a frightened reporter. The interview comes to a dramatic conclusion:

Anastasia: I can feel the Green Lady, but not really see her ...
Who? Who are you? The Green Lady! [Screams] She's gonna eat me. The Green Lady swears to eat me. The Green Lady swears to eat me! [Whispers] You have to chase me, then you have to grab me and go 'bleuraahh'. [Screams] I'm not a fast runner you know. I'm like a chicken. [Screams] I'll hide here.
Libby: Bleuraahh!
Anastasia: Oh I don't feel good. I think I got poison in me. Bye.
[Dramatic voice] Recording over.

Rather than using the recorders to conduct interviews in the sense we might have envisaged as researchers, asking each other about play, this instance shows a playful repurposing of the device to enact an interview with an imagined character. Unexpected to us, it was nonetheless valuable for offering insights into the children's playground cultures, particularly their folkloric 'half-beliefs' about local ghosts, as discussed in more detail in [Chapter 4](#). This highlights the value in embracing children's playful responses to research tools, sometimes unanticipated by researchers, and demonstrates ways in which play itself can be a form of data collection or creation.

We encountered other interesting uses of the audio recorders that gave particular insights into children's awareness of media cultures. For example, Tisha's interview recording took on the style of a news reporter:

Hi, my name is Tisha and I am from the live news, and I am on TV right now reporting this. We are going to ask some children about what they like playing and how they do it. Ok, so let's go find some children who like playing.

Despite only recording audio, she describes herself as being 'on TV', adopting the tone and mannerisms of a news anchor or roving reporter

on 'the live news'. Whereas Tisha's recording draws on conventions of television news media, Shazia drew instead on her familiarity with social media: 'Hey guys! It's me Shazia here on Tuesday, and today I will be talking about the playground [She asks a teaching assistant about her role in the playground] ... So I will see you next time on my next video. Bye!'

Shazia gives an upbeat introduction of 'Hey guys!' before introducing the focus of her recording, and signs off by referencing her 'next video'. These conventions are reminiscent of YouTube vloggers, which we knew to be popular with many of the children in the study through our ongoing observations and conversations (see [Chapter 6](#)). Like Tisha, she pretends to be recording video despite using a device that is only capturing sound. Through their playful use of the audio recorders, they demonstrate their familiarity with visual media of various kinds, both television news and social media vlogging, and the conventions associated with these different forms.

These examples demonstrate the ways in which children blurred the edges between research and play. In addition to the content of the interviews themselves, the ways in which some of the children adopted imagined personas, such as ghost hunter, TV news anchor or YouTuber, offered valuable insights into their experiences of media cultures and, in the case of the Green Lady example, their local folkloric half-beliefs. While these were not anticipated by us when we introduced the audio recorders, and may not resemble 'traditional' research interviews, they were valuable moments of data collection and data creation that offered rich insights into children's play cultures.

Playing with research possibilities

Having access to tools and technologies that were not available to the Opies opened up new research possibilities that we tried to approach playfully. While video-recording interaction has become fairly common in research since the Opies' day, we were interested in experimenting beyond this in an attempt to capture more of the dynamic and multimodal nature of play.

One of our methodological experiments was using multiple recording technologies simultaneously to capture the same moment of play from several perspectives. This aimed to explore the gains and losses of various forms of video-recording, and the potential of combining them. To do this, we invited the children to play some of their favourite

playground games and, with their consent, set up three recording devices. One member of the research team filmed using a handheld iPad, standing a short distance away from the players, panning and tracking the action. One of the research team recorded from the roof of the school building, offering a distance shot that captured the movement of the players from a bird's-eye view above. One of the children was given a wearable GoPro camera attached to a chest harness, which provided a first-person view of the play as they participated in it.

The resulting recordings each offered something distinctive as well as being only a partial record. For instance, the handheld recording required the researcher to make in-the-moment decisions about which players to follow when they ran and spread out, giving a general impression of the scene but sometimes focusing on particular moments of action at the expense of others. The aerial camera was able to record all the players' movements through space but from a distance, meaning the children's voices and more subtle actions such as gesture and gaze were not so easily captured. The first-person GoPro recording privileged the 'child's eye view', accentuating the more physical and embodied aspects of play, such as the sound of feet pounding on the tarmac and rapid changes in direction. The GoPro's focus was determined by the orientation of the child wearing the camera, which was interesting in highlighting the child's focus but did not capture the broader scene of the play.

In combination, the recordings helped us to view the play from multiple perspectives, each foregrounding different aspects of the play episode. One game we recorded in this way was known to the children as 'Granny', a variation of a widespread chasing game. They explained that to play, one person had to pretend to be Granny and fall asleep on the bench, while the other players had to run and hide. After waking up, the children then had to try and return to the bench without being caught by Granny. In the example we recorded, Hibbah (wearing the GoPro camera) took on the role of Granny, sitting on a bench, closing her eyes and counting, while the other children (Milly, Ruby, David and Joseph) ran to far areas of the playground. After opening her eyes, Hibbah called phrases such as 'Granny wants a hug Ruby!' coaxing the other players into attempting to return to the bench.

The aerial recording highlights that as Hibbah advanced, the players were careful to keep their distance to avoid being caught. Simultaneously, when players advanced towards the bench, Hibbah often retreated to try and guard it. In this way, the birds-eye recording draws attention to ways in which children carefully read the space

and proximity between each other and the physical environment. Meanwhile, the GoPro and iPad recordings highlighted the importance of body orientation and gaze, showing that players were looking out for moments of distraction that might allow them to win the game.

From the three combined recordings, we were also able to identify moments of ‘impasse’, where neither Hibbah nor the other players would move great distances, as if attempting to hedge the risks and rewards of movement. From the iPad recordings, we noticed moments where David would do a move the children called the ‘Take the L’ or the ‘Loser Dance’, popular in the videogame *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). The move involved lifting his right hand to make an L-shaped sign on his forehead with his finger and thumb, while alternately kicking each leg outwards. The GoPro recording showed Hibbah orienting to David’s movements, while the aerial recording highlighted how it was part of the overall choreography of the game. We observed that David’s use of ‘Take the L’ often preceded movement forward by Hibbah or followed her retreat back to the bench. In this way, ‘Take the L’ seemed to be used to disrupt moments of impasse in ‘Granny’, both as a provocation to be chased and as a taunt for evading capture.

Our experimentation with three simultaneous recordings of one play episode supported this multimodal analysis from three perspectives, both individually and in combination, and allowed us to look closely at moments when media influences such as *Fortnite* dances became ‘laminated’ with other aspects of playground play (for further discussion of this example, see Potter and Cowan, 2020, and [Chapters 1 and 6](#) of this volume). It encouraged us to look beyond verbal descriptions of play, attuning more closely to the dynamic, physical and spatial qualities of play that are hard to capture using traditional data collection methods.

We also experimented with innovative computer vision techniques to analyse the movement activities of children during playtimes. From the vantage point of the school’s building, we recorded multiple videos of the playground area that have been processed using the open-source computer vision library OpenCV (Bradski, 2000). A custom Python script was created by one of the research team, Valerio Signorelli, to apply the method of background subtraction (Zivkovic, 2004) and to highlight the movement of children in the playground using heatmap visualisation.

The first frame of the video, which only displays the playground, with no other moving elements, was used as a reference model that

was then subtracted from each following frame to create a foreground mask. The resulting images, superimposed frame after frame, provided a heatmap of the intensity of movement over time using a blue–red colour palette. For instance, if a group of children was gathered together in one area of the playground, and this activity was prolonged throughout the recording, the overlaid colour would be saturated from blue through to red (Figure 5.5).

We found these heatmap experiments useful for drawing attention to areas of the playspace where there was a particular intensity of action, and trajectories of movement between them, which we could then explore through our on-the-ground ethnographic observations. For instance, the heatmap showed that children often gathered in a corner of the playground near to the entrance. Observing this in person, we found it was a space that was often a base or destination for games, as well as a somewhat private semi-enclosed area where some children would choose to gather and chat.

There were occasions when we encountered challenges in our experimental research design that required adaptability. At the outset of the project, we had hoped to use a drone to record aerial footage of the playgrounds. However, in London, the schools were surrounded by high-rise buildings that restricted drone use. We compensated for this by recording aerial footage from the roofs of the school buildings, as

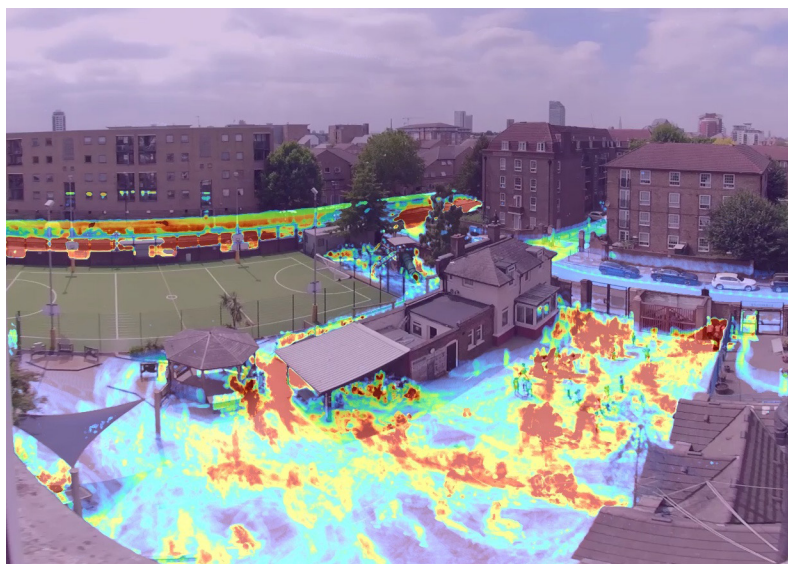


Figure 5.5 A ‘heatmap’ of activity in the playground. © Valerio Signorelli.

described in this chapter. On the Sheffield school site, in a more rural location, it was possible to fly a drone above the playground but not while children were playing in it. Instead, a group of children in this school accompanied the research team and a drone pilot to create aerial recordings of the playground space while it was empty.

The GoPro cameras also initially presented some practical challenges. While we anticipated the GoPros to be unfamiliar to the children, and most had not used one before, they were largely familiar with them through YouTube and keen to use them. We offered the children the possibility of wearing the camera on a head strap, but since this was designed for adults and proved to be uncomfortable for the children, they instead chose to wear the camera on a chest-mounted harness. As such, the GoPro recordings give a sense of the wearer's bodily orientation but importantly cannot exactly convey the child's head direction or gaze.

Along with new potentials, new technologies for data collection such as GoPro cameras and drones also present new ethical challenges. In particular, the usage of GoPros and drones may have connotations of surveillance and intrusions of privacy. New technologies therefore require revisiting of existing ethical guidance in order to ensure high ethical standards are maintained in all methodologies, making relevant adaptations where necessary (see Chalfen, 2014; Hall and Wahab, 2021). We were particularly careful to explain the technologies' functions and the planned usage of recordings in our study to all research participants beforehand, including teachers, parents/guardians and the children themselves, and to ensure that voluntary informed consent was freely given each time these technologies were used.

Overall, we found value in thinking playfully about the possibilities offered by digital technologies not available at the time of the Opies. Our methodological experiments were creative, trying out combinations of technologies and techniques for data collection beyond the typical and standard. We feel that our efforts were rewarded, particularly in terms of capturing the dynamic and multimodal qualities of play not easily recorded in written accounts. In this way, our methods built on the legacy of the Opies, bringing contemporary research possibilities to their child-centred and play-centred ethos.

Research as play and play as research

While this chapter has explored research as play, it might also be argued that play itself is a form of enquiry. A quote famously attributed to Albert Einstein is that ‘play is the highest form of research’, suggesting that playful experimentation is a significant process in the construction of ideas. Similar views have been expressed by Scarfe, who argues that ‘play is essentially a research activity – an adventure, an experiment, a transactional process. It is motivated by innate curiosity and enquiry ... Play has the joy of discovery, the satisfaction of creativity’ (Scarfe, 1962: 120).

Many play pioneers, from Froebel to Vygotsky, have similarly emphasised play as a key way children explore and make sense of the world around them. While play is often dismissed by adults as a trivial and frivolous activity, these perspectives framing play as research acknowledge its significance, recognising that the intrinsically motivated, curious, open-ended nature of play has many connections with the traits of enquiry and experimentation inherent in research. These connections might be extended and expanded to academic research, with Arnott and Wall (2021) arguing convincingly for conducting research through play and James (2019) making the case for a playful university.

Characterised by qualities such as fluidity, vitality, spontaneity and surprise, play offers a research stance that might be particularly accommodating of the messy energy of everyday life, with parallels to the concept of ‘hopscotch modernism’ (Highmore, 2006) explored in Chapter 3. As well as being an interesting focus of research itself, play might also encapsulate a non-linear and cross-disciplinary approach to enquiry, ‘hopscotching’ across and between boundaries in a rich and generative way.

We therefore believe there is much to be gained from exploring the intertwined concepts of research as play and play as research when defining a research focus and developing methodologies, particularly when working with young children and investigating their play experiences but also, perhaps, in other avenues of social science. As demonstrated in this chapter, ethnographic, participatory and multimodal approaches might be particularly apt for supporting a range of playful methods, allowing for flexibility and surprise in the research process, encouraging experimentation with tools and technologies, attuning to the messy vitality of everyday life, and inviting moments when boundaries between research and play are blurred and blended. Working in the spirit of the Opies, taking play seriously and valuing children as play experts, our work highlights the importance of

giving children playful agency in the research process and the value of perspectives that support close attention to the dynamic, multimodal nature of play.

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Play and digital media: laminates, frames and lifeworlds

John Potter and Kate Cowan

Media and the Opies

In popular discourse, play has a complex and sometimes difficult relationship with media, frequently characterised in deficit terms in debates about screen time and the perceived ‘addictive’ nature of computer games. Indeed, media has sometimes been seen as a disruptor to the natural rhythms of play, an interference in the natural order of children’s games and a threat to ‘traditional’ play forms. The Opies themselves perceived this view as a kind of ‘block’ in adults’ minds. Thinking about this, Iona Opie wrote:

Other researchers have told me that this is always the first remark when they go into a play-ground to enquire about games – ‘They don’t play them any more.’ It is a kind of block. It is a kind of conviction in the adult mind. And it has existed for a very long time. One of the things we tried to do in *Games with Things* was to trace this belief back as far as possible. Samuel Pepys was sure that boys did not amuse themselves in the way he used to as a boy. In the nineteenth century, one thing after another was blamed for the disappearance of children’s games. It was the national schools, the railways, the cinema, the gramophone, motoring. Then, in this century, the standardisation of life, television, and pop music. More recently, since early in this decade, teachers have simply stated, ‘Children appear to have lost the art of playing games.’

(Opie, 2014: 202)

The Opies found play and games alive and well, even in the context of increasing access to media forms, and in our studies of children's play we have also found the relationship with media to be far more nuanced than that of 'disruptor'. In the playgrounds in which we conducted the research for *Playing the Archive*, far from being an impediment to play and creativity, media and popular culture have formed a rich pool of cultural resources on which children can draw, just as the Opies did with their collected references to the cinematic heroes of the time and the emergence of television characters in children's games (Opie, 1994; Opie and Opie, 1959). Contemporary media is indeed far more pervasive, and the screens more varied and omnipresent, than in the early days of the Opie collection. Even so, far from being a threat to the natural order of things, we have seen how play and media are mutually constitutive and interdependent in the embodied performances, remixes and quotations which we observed children creating together throughout our time in the playground research sites in *Playing the Archive*.

Increasingly, interactions between play and popular culture are 'social media' based, with children's play inflected with the entanglements which increasingly complicate the notions of consumer and producer, as, taking inspiration from the internet, children play at being content providers for TikTok or YouTube, for example. So, while children have always been makers of new forms of games derived from references to broadcast media, and have often been written about as such (Willett et al., 2013), they are now also playing at being media producers, either pretending to make their own shows, falling into role as roving social media reporters and influencers, or even, as in the case of one 10-year-old we encountered, running their own YouTube channel, of which more later.

The contemporary discourse of bad media, of 'toxic childhood' (Palmer, 2015), and the death of imagination and traditional, playful ritual in children's games, was revealed during the research for this project to be, at least, questionable. There were copious examples throughout the research of children's play being inflected with media forms of all kinds, from K-Pop to social media influencers, from broadcast media (citing Scooby Doo and SpongeBob SquarePants) and YouTubers through to online multiplayer games such as *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). These were repurposed, remade and resituated within and around the overarching 'kaleidoscopic vitality of the playground' (Opie, 1994). Indeed, our observations in this project of the entanglements and interdependence of media, popular culture and play have been further underlined in projects which have come

before and after *Playing the Archive* (see also Burn and Richards, 2014; Cowan et al., 2021).

Playground media: laminates, frames and lifeworlds

In our ethnographic work in *Playing the Archive*, then, we have observed how children have remixed popular media culture in their play. We have also seen how they have made use of the media tools we gave them for research purposes, such as voice recorders and iPads, as inspiration for role-play in themselves. As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), in the research schools, we collected many hours of footage from both GoPro cameras and iPads, together with hours of audio from voice recorders. We would arrive in the playground for morning or lunchtime play and dispense the voice recorders to our researchers and child informants on play and they would run off with them in all directions. Reviewing the data again, with the distance in time, reveals a substantial record of a specific set of circumstances: play in schools with a particular ethos, in specific locations, alongside a set of media references in play which have given us pause for thought about how media arrives in play in the form of texts, artefacts and practices.

In thinking about our observations of children's games and our conversations with the child researchers in our playgrounds, like our colleagues in Sheffield, Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop (see [Chapter 9](#)), we began to use the concept of 'laminates' or 'lamination' as a way to characterise how children, between each other in their playground talk and actions, use language, gesture, image and speech both to frame and reframe their play in different ways (Nelson, 2021; Potter and Cowan, 2020). Building on this, we have identified several ways in which these frames move simultaneously and often seamlessly between children's lifeworlds, folkloric and site-specific imagination, the transmitted game forms from the past, and their pleasure and affective response to contemporary media.

It might be helpful to explore the sense in which we are using the terms 'laminates' and the concept of 'frames', to examine where they come from and why they might be useful. As with all terminology, there is a semantic shift in how words are applied which occurs over time and fundamentally alters their meaning. In this case, for clarity, how we are operating with the term 'laminate' is closest to the uses of the concept employed by studies of literacy practices and events in classrooms (Holland and Leander, 2004; Leander and Frank, 2006) in which such

events and practices are understood as laminates of experience, in which social actors, in these cases in formal settings of education, are understood as being co-present in virtual space and real space simultaneously, defining their identities and subjectivities moment to moment. We saw children doing this through their play, drawing on the resources of many different laminates of their experience, moment to moment. As we will see, these laminates of experience moved between their 'lifeworlds', their 'folkloric imagination', their sense of 'community and belonging' and, fundamentally for this piece of writing, their uses of media and play in an interdependent process which we came to refer to as 'Play as media remix'.

Arguably, these laminates are also ways to 'frame' the experience. And, in this sense, we are drawing on Goffman (1990), who was writing about 'frames' in human interaction, usually in the context of work, but also in the context of 'everyday life'. *Play* is a very specific frame of experience established by the players themselves, with others or alone, in differing levels of complexity and richness. Bateson (1972) wrote specifically about 'play frames' in his work as communicating the message 'this is play' and establishing an activity as something distinct from 'real life'. Sometimes this play has deep resonance and sometimes the meaning is more fleeting or difficult to comprehend. In all cases, at any one time, in the act of playing, the children draw on resources of differing frames of experience all of which have the potential for 'affect intensity' (Larsen and Diener, 1987) in the 'kaleidoscopic vitality' (Opie, 1994) of the playground.

To summarise, in our observations of children's play, guided by our child researchers as co-producers of the work, we were able to see evidence of the following laminates or frames of experience, any one of which could be used to view any of the others:

- *Lifeworlds* – Cultural resources for playground games drawn from family and home
- *Folkloric imagination* – Resources which enabled reworking traditions of playground games and lore, playing with the templates of children's games from years gone by
- *Community and belonging* – Connectedness within the space, common reference points and stories of the school, including imaginary figures, memories of years together at school
- *Play as media remix* – Resources for play drawn from media culture, texts, practices and artefacts

Play and media, laminates and frames: some examples in the data

The examples which follow are all taken from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two inner-London primary schools, viewed from the frame of ‘play as media remix’, a key laminate in children’s playground games in which the node of ‘Repertoire’ in the Circuit of Play in [Chapter 1](#) becomes increasingly complex, integrating children’s traditional play repertoires and their media and sport cultures in the process of lamination. Each laminate also surfaces aspects of the other three laminates, and all of them illustrate the moment-to-moment vitality of improvisation and meaning-making which is present on the playground. Once again, this challenges the notion that childhood play is no longer taking place with the full panoply of creativity and ritual in the media age.

We will explore some examples of media-inflected play in the sections which follow. From the outset, we acknowledge that without an analytical frame derived from a combination of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, [2011](#)) and thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, [2012](#)), we would be unable to construct the kind of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, [1973](#)) necessary to engage in theory-building around play and how games are invented or transmitted, shared and preserved through time (Potter, [2024](#)).

‘Red card for Lingard’ and ‘Doing a Neymar’

One of the phases of data collection coincided with the Men’s Football World Cup in 2018. The children we observed in the football pitch area of the school playground took on the mediated tropes of the tournament in their play, not only *referencing* but also *performing* the activities which were relayed daily on broadcast media and social media during the tournament. For instance, children took on identities of popular England players such as Jesse Lingard and Jordan Pickford as well as international stars, announcing these new identities and enacting them in their gameplay. Instances of football play drawing on media had been noted previously by Iona Opie, who wrote about children liking football so much ‘because they can watch the very best players on the television’ ([2014](#): 202).

This World Cup was the first major contest in which remote assistant referees used screens to pause and review controversial or borderline decision-making by referees. This was the Video Assistant Referee system, or VAR, which is now commonplace in major footballing events. But, at

the time, it was a dramatic addition to the game and discussed frequently by commentary teams during media coverage. Communication with the VAR team, together with instant in-game reviews by the referee at a pitch-side monitor screen, resulted in additional drama over the awarding of penalties or the debating of a sending-off for foul play, events which could change the course of a key football match. This disruption of the events on the pitch to enable mediated decision-making to take place was observed being re-enacted by the children. In their football play, controversial incidents took place or were performed taking place, with one boy in the role of a match referee, running over to the side of the football area, communicating with an imaginary VAR team and crouching to study an imaginary screen, before turning back to the play and announcing a decision. We observed the accuracy of the performance, with children pausing the action of the game theatrically while the 'check' was completed. When a player was sent off, as happened during one sequence filmed on a GoPro camera worn by one of our child researchers, the action extended to physical red cards being brandished and the player being named and shamed ('Red card for Lingard'), bringing materiality into the play with the gestures of card-waving employed in the same way as they were on screen.

A further dramatic re-enactment concerned incidents of serious foul play, even where it was unclear if it had taken place, in much the same way as in football matches. One player, the Brazilian forward Neymar, rightly or wrongly became notorious during the 2018 World Cup for attempting to dupe referees into thinking he had been fouled and was seriously injured as a result, frequently lying motionless on the pitch for some time, clutching his face or rolling over and over from an incident to exaggerate its impact. These events were replayed many times in broadcast media commentary and on social media, where memes of Neymar circulated, mocking him rolling over and over when knocked over by an opposition player. On the playground, a boy lay prone for some time while other children casually observed that there was nothing wrong with him, a fact borne out by his moving around and being filmed lying in many different positions all over the football area.

The influence of media representations on children's play has been noted before in our work and that of others (Gilje and Silseth, 2019; Marsh and Bishop, 2014; Potter and Cowan, 2020). What we saw in our fieldwork in *Playing the Archive* in the case of 'Red card for Lingard' was the rapid incorporation of contemporary media tropes into the usual frenetic playground activity, generating fresh, shared reference points. We would argue, along with Willett (2011), that there is more work

going on here in remixing media into meaning-making than merely referencing media in play.

Social media remixes and artefactual literacies: LDShadowLady, voice recorders and YouTube channels

YouTube entered play on many levels, including via a material artefact brought into the playground during a typical playtime, in the adoption of dramatic personas when using a voice recorder (see [Chapter 5](#)) and even in the case of one child owning her own YouTube channel. TikTok was also in evidence but not yet as prevalent in the playground in 2018 as we might expect to find it at the time of writing in 2024.

One of the most interesting was the use of material resources, paper and drawing, to connect media representational interest to play. As we observed in 2020:

One playtime, Ruhana showed us a drawn image that she told us was of the YouTuber LDShadowLady, a UK-based gamer with a channel mainly devoted to the video game Minecraft. She explained to us that she had traced her image on the laptop screen the night before, coloured it, written LDShadowLady's real name (Lizzie, written phonetically as 'Lize') beside the drawing and brought it to school. At morning break, she brought the crumpled piece of paper out into the playground, a physical representation of her hero with whom she could play imaginary games and demonstrate her fandom. The physical artefact was important in the imaginative world she created in the playground and her play, a bridge between the virtual playspace of the screen and the physically located playspace of the playground.

(Potter and Cowan, [2020](#): 10)

It seemed that the bridge formed by bringing the paper artefact into the playground connected home, media and school cultures in this girl's play. Her artefactual literacy practices also called to mind the red card produced in the boys' mediated football play (see the section "Red card for Lingard" and "Doing a Neymar").

Other material devices which connected the media cultures of home and school were the small voice recorders which we handed out at playtimes for children to conduct research into their play. They frequently adopted YouTube reporter personas when using the devices. Several of our recordings feature children introducing themselves as

reporters for their ‘social media channels’. This adaptation of the media artefact into role-play has been observed in many studies of children’s play with ‘real’ objects, though it is recognised that almost all of these focus on the earliest years, reporting on children under the age of seven (see Whitebread et al., 2017). In the playground, older children also moved enthusiastically into the role-play as presenters, eliding their role as participant researchers in the project with their media-referencing play using a real digital device as part of the ‘assemblage’ of their play. Drawing on Burnett and Merchant’s work in *Undoing the Digital* (2020), we can arguably view this episode of play as further evidence of their concept of ‘literacy as event’ as a refinement of the ‘literacy event’ derived from Street (2003) and others in ‘The New Literacy Studies’ (Gee, 2015). In this case, we found an example of meaning-making anchored by the reference point of the material device but folding in ‘multiple times and spaces’ in its incorporation of the immediate purpose (research into play) and past and present experiences of ‘influencers’ and media producers in popular culture.

Becoming a YouTuber: playful production

The children were our guides as well as our assistants in uncovering the place of media in their play lives. In one interview, play in the home around YouTube was revealed as full engagement with contemporary social media production. With her parents as gatekeepers because she is only 10, and with her awareness of the risks of online life at a high level, one of our research informants described her own social media channel on YouTube and how she works on it. In the recording, the conversation initially ranged far and wide, covering playground games, games from other cultures and in the family, and finally, in the closing stages, the kinds of contemporary play at home:

John (Researcher): What games do you play on things like iPhones, tablets or computers these days?

Safiya: I have a iPhone, right? And you’re probably like, what? But I use that to record my videos and everything.

So, I want to tell you about how I edit my videos ...

[*Her friend interrupts to ask what’s your channel? And she replies: I’m not telling you. And continues ...*]

What I use ... I actually use lots of apps to do it so it looks professional because I’m using my phone ... so I get my phone and record a normal camera and use different clips ... and I tap it and say ‘hey

guys' and stand away from it and what I do is I trim it afterwards so you can't see the bits where I've tapped it and ... I do that for all my clips, so it looks like good yeah? So after it will go through FilmoraGo which is a editing app which I use to put like pictures, to insert pictures, and to put it all together, the clips ... then it goes through Splice S – P – L – I – C – E, weird name, and then I will put like sound in there and like voiceovers and all that stuff and then it will go through to Vlogit and I know it goes through lots of apps and then Vlogit is the final app and then do you know thumbnails? What thumbnails are? So, I'll take a picture so I'll be like this or I'll have like a pizza on my head, which I have done that before, it's like 'my first time at a pizzeria', so then first it will go through YouTube Thumbnail and I'll put stickers on and then it'll go through like 'clips' and I'll put like nice stickers and labels on and like 'No Way' and all that stuff and like 'YouTube' and then I'll put it through to YouTube Creator Studio which ... YouTube made that app so that you can upload your thumbnails to the videos ... so that's all what I do for my editing ...

The breathless account given by Safiya conveys so much enthusiasm and pleasure from making videos, even through the complex process she uses to edit the clips. She is carrying this knowledge into her days at school and was one of our original co-researchers involved in making one of the playground tours for us in the early days of our time in the school, filming on one of our research iPads. In the same interview, she told us: 'I like to watch inspirational YouTubers and I like to see what they are doing in their life.' She named Saffron Barker and Rosie McClelland as inspirational to her, both vloggers with large numbers of followers. Both are still uploading content at the time of writing, in the middle of 2024, around holidays, weddings and buying houses. Six years ago, at the time our co-researcher was watching them, they were sharing school experiences, beauty tips, preferences for ice cream and more. They were suggesting a form of engagement with media which went beyond viewing into identity management and curation in digital media (Potter, 2012; Potter and McDougall, 2017).

The pleasure and positive affect in Safiya reporting on this aspect of her life were typical of our co-researchers and informants throughout the research visits. It is possible that they spotted the opportunity to record their experiences and pleasure in playground life in a YouTube style early in the process of recruitment to take part alongside us. Certainly, this child was an early adopter of the role and, as noted, filmed one

of the playground tours for us, though we only discovered her media channel towards the end of our time at the school. Media production, with permission to film in school, was potentially an act of boundary crossing, creating the conditions for a ‘third space’ to exist, in which the hierarchies between researcher and subject were, to an extent, flattened (Hawley and Potter, 2022). Media in projects in which the researchers key into these experiences alongside children are potentially generative of wider insights into their lifeworlds and, in this project, opened play experiences as central to making meaning about their subjectivities and identities, alongside rendering visible their rich and diverse experiences of media culture.

Lemonade, iPhones and handstands: laminates in action

The laminate of ‘community and belonging’ is closely linked to ‘lifeworlds’ but refers to how play builds community and belonging in its reference points, its rituals and actions of bonding and togetherness. Some of the most obvious examples here are clapping games, with the element of touch reinforcing bonding and shared understanding of the ritual itself. The community welcomes ‘newbies’ and is a strong generator of ‘affect’ and learning in the ‘affinity space’ of the playground (Gee, 2004). Belonging is also seen as moving through the space together, with a gang, arms linked, following the traces explored in earlier chapters. But the clapping games and rhymes provide spaces for invention as much as tradition and media devices themselves feature in several examples of this.

One such example involved a clapping rhyme called ‘Lemonade’, which was particularly well-known among the children in our study and had the following lyrics:

Lemonade
Iced Tea
Coca Cola
Pepsi
Lemonade
Iced Tea
Coca Cola
Pepsi
Turn around
Touch the ground

Flick your hair
I don't care
Freeze
Star star star star
Icky icky yah yah
Boom!

The first four lines featured accompanying partnered claps, followed by a triple clap that was then omitted when chanted a second time. The clapping game also incorporated gestures to follow such as turning around on the spot and keeping still on the command 'freeze'. It was performed often and expertly by many children in the playground, mainly girls, sometimes in pairs and sometimes in large groups standing in circles.

During one playtime, a seven-year-old girl named Aisha told us about another clapping game she knew called 'iPhone'. She said she had learned it from her sister and offered to demonstrate. It consisted of the following lyrics:

OMG
Chat chat chat
On my phone
Snapchat
OMG
Chat chat chat
On my phone
Snapchat
Turn around
Oh no my battery's dead – freeze!

In 'iPhone', the clapping actions and gestures have strong similarities to 'Lemonade' (partnered claps and triple claps that are then omitted when repeated) but the lyrics relate to contemporary global technologies and social media, such as the chat abbreviation 'OMG' and social media app 'Snapchat'. Like 'Lemonade', 'iPhone' includes a command to turn around then hold still and freeze, but this version associates it with a battery dying, and it denotes the end of the game (for further analysis, see Potter and Cowan, 2020).

A few days later we noted a moment of improvisation and evolution, where the rhyme started to change again. Two girls were making up a further clapping rhyme, again with similar rhythms and

clapping patterns to 'Lemonade' and 'iPhone', this time referencing WiFi and Bluetooth, when one of their friends appeared and performed a handstand against the wall next to them, an activity returned to as a 'cartwheel' when glimpsed in the moment of rhyme-making by one of the children. Initially far from disrupting the creative process, the lyrics fold in the technology, the child (by name and activity) and several other references, including media texts, all within the same game:

Bluetooth
WiFi
Connecting my phone
Evie
Cartwheels
Jumping
SpongeBob
SquarePants
Dancing like
A Skeleton ...

Eventually, this moment of composition breaks down, but the improvisation, the 'play as media remix', is an assemblage of known reference points from media, and from familiar rhyming patterns. It is held together using touch, and by its associated community reinforcement and cohesion, as well as by both the gaze and joint performance of the clapping. Several of the proposed 'laminates' are in concert together in this example: 'Play as media remix', 'community and belonging' and 'folkloric imagination'.

Fortnite dances: popular cultural ubiquity in playground movement

At the time we were collecting data for *Playing the Archive* in the first half of 2018, the video game *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) was making its way into the public consciousness in a big way. As an online, massively multiplayer game in which people competed for survival, it was instantly famous. In the popular press and broadcast media, there were numerous scare stories about the levels of violence in the gameplay itself. In the playground, we were working with children who had seen some of the game and possibly played it alongside older siblings but, often, were feeding off knowledge gained from commentary about the game, in their family or the media, rather than direct personal engagement.

One aspect of *Fortnite* which had particular appeal and notoriety was the dances, which players could perform in-game as victory celebrations. These dances made their way out of the game world into YouTube and broadcast media and back again in a circular route, an example of the media ecosystem in action and the interdependence of older media forms and social media which called to mind an update on the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al., 1997). Indeed, these dances were themselves adaptations of both older media references drawn into *Fortnite* from broadcast media, such as the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and older traditional forms of dance (see also Potter and Cowan, 2020: 13). In the playground this form of play was ubiquitous. The circuit is further extended, as Burn shows in Chapter 1, by the Circuit of Play, in which these media ecosystems serve as another form of archive from which the children draw in their performative play repertoires. Sometimes, children would call out names of different *Fortnite* dances and wait for others to demonstrate they could do them, similar to the traditional game ‘Simon Says’. Spare moments in the play, while children waited to talk to each other, join a game or engage with the child researchers, or with us, were also often filled with children doing the game on the spot, usually the popular dances, ‘The Floss’ or ‘Take the L’. Reviewing footage shows children in the background doing the dances in ways unconnected to games or for particular purposes. We observed ‘Take the L’ being used as a taunt to other players in a chasing game, in which the players had to make it home to a bench without being tagged. One of the players took delight in performing it in front of the girl who was ‘it’ and trying to catch people. We have seen previously how the GoPro cameras and other filming with iPads unlocked passages of play which were easy to miss on a first viewing or with a single camera point of view. And how multimodal analysis of gesture, image and speech from the footage enabled us to ‘read’ the play in particular ways. We could see layers in ‘Take the L’ itself, showing a global media reference being blended and interwoven with traditional physical pursuit games such as ‘Granny’, highlighting the layered meaning-making of contemporary playground play (Potter and Cowan, 2020: 8).

Granny was a further layered media reference in which children were again playing with transgressive modes, since it referenced the many variants of the horror game online in which a shadowy figure of a Granny chases and attacks players in a house. Sutton-Smith refers to these forms of play as ‘Phantasmagoria’ as one of his ‘rhetorics’ and draws TV and media texts, as well as toys, into the arguments (see Sutton-Smith, 1997, especially Chapter 9: 151–72), connecting play to popular culture and consumption.

Children's relationships to the stories in the space of the school which have been handed down were every bit as important to playground imaginative and creative play as their knowledge of Granny, *Fortnite*, and even the traditional rhymes handed down. They loved the enduring stories of ghosts in the school which became overlaid with laminates from the media forms we have discussed. Further demonstrating the laminated nature of play, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), especially pretend play, the Green Lady, a ghostly figure haunting one of the schools over many decades, joined Granny and more contemporary tropes, coming full circle in the play with voice recorders mentioned in 'Social media remixes and artefactual literacies' above, as our child researchers would become roving YouTube reporters informing us about the dangers of all these figures as they became blurred and entangled with one another.

Conclusion: thoughts on laminates, media and play in Playing the Archive

Our four suggested laminates of activity in the play represent a way to piece together the multifaceted nature of the games we observed and to pay attention to the richness and detail that they reveal about children's lives. We have arrived at these findings by engaging with children as co-producers of the research. Our conversations with them have led to us seeing aspects of their 'lifeworlds', 'community and belonging' and 'folkloric imagination', and some of their play as complex 'media remix'. This latter point is important because it positions media as much more than a simple referent. As we wrote, recalling Willett's work:

Willett found this activity was never simply an end in itself as a form of quotation or 'media reference'. Instead, it was a fruitful location for hypothesising across the four dimensions of social performance, learning, recontextualisation and preteen girlhood (Willett, 2011). Our experiences, 10 years on, revealed fewer performances derived from broadcast media and far more, as might be expected, from social media and online gaming. Nevertheless, in the many references to YouTube and TikTok, there were continuities with earlier findings in how 'remix' operated, drawing on the resource of the virtual spaces of screen-based media as raw material for play, and for making meaning through play. This was, of course, ephemeral, but also dynamic,

sophisticated and worthy of close attention to the detail of lived experience of popular digital culture.

(Potter and Cowan, 2020: 13)

The role of the child ‘interpreter’ is alluded to in Iona Opie’s earlier work (1994: 2), the children guiding the researcher into the apparent kaleidoscopic chaos of the playground itself. As we have previously outlined, we worked alongside child researchers (Potter and Cowan, 2020) who either commented on what we were seeing when we replayed recordings or offered their own recordings or further examples of their play in and beyond the playground. This enabled us to see how at any one time these ‘laminates’ in play display an overarching ‘affective intensity’ over the others by assuming a priority in the call to action and response in the playground. Digging deeper into responses allowed us to see how they work together. A child might simultaneously reference a game, a relationship with their peers, a community memory or a local, site-specific folkloric tale. As mentioned, in some of the accounts from children in the school, a reference to the history of the Green Lady, a ghostly figure resident on the second floor of the Victorian building that they were in, calls to mind the space, the materiality of the building, its atmosphere, the shared intensity of the experience of being there, being in that school together. This in turn brings into play the community and belonging in that space. In the case of both schools we visited, the presence of the past is all around, and in one case the stairwell is lined with photos of the building and children in times gone by. Out in the playground, all was refracted through the lens of computer games, media and wider popular culture and was often excitedly narrated directly to the researcher, or into a voice recorder, in the process becoming part of the oral history of the playground.

From what we have seen, popular culture in media forms of all kinds is a key catalyst for invention and a location for creative and inventive activity and action in the world. Indeed, for some time arguments have been made about culture being constitutive of the mind, whether from social psychology itself (Bruner, 1990) or from variants of literacy studies in which the contextual nature of meaning-making provides us with a basis from which to explore in a non-judgemental way what language does in specific situations, rather than its ‘correct’ abstract forms (Gee, 2015; Pahl, 2014), or from those who have been tirelessly promoting media education for several years (Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham, 2019; Burn, 2009; Burn and Durran, 2007). In the playground, we see this most clearly in the shifting registers and references which do

socio-cultural and socio-linguistic work on popular cultural repertoires. This subsequently appears in play of all kinds: skipping games, rhyming games, chasing games, hiding games, tagging games, imaginative play and more. Furthermore, in its appropriation of media forms and recombination with existing templates and patterns, we have seen play is also a site for invention and creative activity, challenging assumptions about the negative effects of screens.

From Haas Dyson's work on superheroes (1997) through to Wohlwend's work on children's identity texts (2009), there is ample evidence of the remediation of popular cultural forms in a variety of circumstances in children's learning lives and, as Willett has written (2011), also in their play. As a site for meaning-making, we observed sophisticated negotiation and improvisation in children's play leading to new forms of composition and identity production in their games and imaginative play.

The entry of children's external culture in the more formal setting of the classroom inevitably remains problematic, particularly in education systems which discourage engagement with media in curricular activity. Arguments for opening the curriculum up to a more positive relationship with media culture have frequently been made (Cannon et al., 2014), including most recently as an issue of human rights (Cannon et al., 2022). The things of value which children could bring with them into the world of school which have expressive, social and improvisatory power include their knowledge of and enthusiasm for media forms, and their skills and dispositions towards creativity and invention in their play.

Some aspects of external culture crossing the boundary into school from home have been variously referred to as 'funds of knowledge', with origins in both education and anthropology (Moll et al., 1992), or, more recently, as a pedagogical initiative, albeit one which does not particularly give attention media or popular culture, 'funds of identity' (Esteban-Guitart, 2021). These are potentially useful theoretical frames which admit the outside world into the world of the classroom across the 'semi-permeable membrane' between home and school (Potter, 2012), but play itself, and the recording and theorising of play, provides us with examples of these kinds of processes in action with regard to media and popular cultural references. The playground is *not* the classroom. It is its own ecosystem, radiating Iona Opie's 'kaleidoscopic vitality', and it has not yet been colonised by adults. But in observing the playful invention and improvisation around media in the playground, we have been able to see how children exhibit 'possibility thinking' and creativity in their

meaning-making with others when popular culture is a part of their action on the world.

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From interfaces to memories: reconstructing and transmitting memories of play

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Archive and interface

At one point during the ethnographic work which informed the development of the technological interventions created by the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis as part of the Playing the Archive project, the researchers took a retrofitted GPO 746 rotary telephone ([Figure 7.1](#)) to demonstrate to children attending one of the inner-London primary schools participating in the ethnographic strand of the project. The children with whom we were working, all between the ages of seven and nine in 2018, knew the device was a telephone, but were unfamiliar with how it worked. As one child said when asked how they would make a call with it: ‘Oh, you just press the buttons.’ We then spent some time allowing them to explore the device and ‘dial’ numbers and listen to the original audio recordings from the Opie Archive.

The children’s reaction to the rotary phone contrasted strongly with their reaction to the other devices they used during the research project (see [Chapter 6](#)). Apple iPads, which we used to allow the children to take video recordings of their experience of playground environments, as well as interact with digital content through augmented reality (AR), were familiar and required very little instruction before use, and even less everyday devices, such as spherical capture GoPro cameras, digital audio recorders and even virtual reality (VR) headsets, weren’t that difficult for them to understand and use (Bratton, [2016](#)).

This contrast encapsulates the intuition that underpins the case studies presented in this chapter: that the interface through which



Figure 7.1 The first version of the retrofitted GPO 746 red rotary phone used as part of the *Time Telephone* installation at the Young V&A. © Valerio Signorelli.

somebody accesses archival materials changes the way that they engage with those materials, which, in turn, affects how they think about and relate to the past from which those materials emerge. This chapter is concerned, then, with the relationship between the nodes of Archive and Interface represented in the Circuit of Play presented in [Chapter 1](#), and with the related minor node of Memory.

Interfaces for memories, memories of interfaces

Before the personal computer became widespread in the 1990s, interactions with technological systems were differently structured. A history of the human-computer interface might start with the punched card, and move through to the teleprinter, and the whole host of dials,

knobs, switches, gauges and sliders by which humans have controlled electronic devices. The dual interface of the mouse and keyboard, or the single interactive surface of the touch screen, are comparatively recent inventions and represent, at the moment, the most refined and naturalised of computer interfaces. Older interfaces present different models of the world, different sets of affordances, and different modes through which we might act through technology and it act back upon us. For Kittler (1987), the process of digitalisation has a flattening effect:

The general digitalization of information and channels erases the difference between individual media. Sound and image, voice and text have become mere effects on the surface, or, to put it better, the interface for the consumer. Sense and the senses become mere glitter. Their media-produced glamour will last throughout the transitional period as a waste product of strategic programs. In computers, everything becomes a number: imageless, soundless, and wordless quantity. And if the optical fibre network reduces all formerly separate data flows to one standardized digital series of numbers, any medium can be translated into another.

(Kittler, 1987: 102)

Writing in 1987, following the introduction of the personal computer but prior to the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee et al., 1992), Kittler is identifying and also anticipating the risk of technological modes of standardisation in their capacity to reduce sensory experiences to consumer spectacle. Acknowledging this risk, but taking issue with Kittler's pessimism, our project set out to determine whether novel digital technologies might be integrated into existing media, as 'interfacial archaeology', to enable museum visitors to forge meaningful connections to one another and the past. Recognising the importance of the human senses in evoking memories (Van Campen, 2014), and the multisensory quality of the content collected by Iona and Peter Opie, we decided to explore sound as the primary medium through which we might encourage people to explore the archive through listening.

The Opies themselves were enthusiastic adopters of new technology, including using tape recorders in their research, for example, with the recording made by Iona Opie at Coram's Fields in London in 1974 (Opie, 1974). Just as the content of this recording is profoundly evocative of a time and place, in the sense described in Michael Eades' account of the

Opies' traversal of London spaces (see [Chapter 3](#)), the medium of the tape recording itself is significant: the crackle and hiss of tape and the attenuated frequency response of old recording and playback equipment serve to emphasise the distance between now and then.

Here, following Walter Benjamin (1968), the concept of 'aura' becomes relevant. The interfaces we use every day are invisible: as part of the fabric of everyday life, they hold no auratic charge. Yet old technology, at a certain point, and despite the fact that it was once commonplace, does. The re-popularisation of vinyl, cassettes and even CDs attests to this; but so does nostalgia for arcade games, old videogame consoles or other devices, such as Nokia's re-release in 2017 of the 3310 mobile phones, a highly influential mobile phone model presented to the public at the beginning of the 2000s (Gibbs, 2017). It seems that even the most ordinary object, given the passage of time, can be reinvested with auratic power. Our question, in developing our prototypes, such as the *Time Telephone*, is how we might use the auratic charge of interfaces to help us think critically about the ideologies and temporalities of technologies, while also harnessing the technological interface as a vessel for conveying memories.

Interfaces for memories, in our definition, refer to the various technologies, tools and platforms that are designed to help individuals capture, store and share personal memories as data. In *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Benjamin Bratton (2016) defines an interface as '*any point of contact between two complex systems that governs the conditions of exchange between those systems*' (italics in original) (Bratton, 2016: 241). These interfaces can take many forms, such as digital cameras, audio recorders, social media platforms and cloud-based storage systems. In this context, we have interfaces specific to the devices used and created for the Playing the Archive project, including media players, modified rotary telephones and playing cards. Conceptually and practically, the interfaces of these devices allow access to complex systems which transform visual and sonic information into digital data, and facilitate the storage, retrieval and playback of these data as media items.

What connects memory interfaces, then, is their role in capturing, storing and enabling access to memories, including through data-sharing. Memory in this respect refers to both the cultural process of recording, retaining and retrieving information, and the digital counterpart of that process in data storage. There is, however, a challenge here – namely, to go beyond the standard social media replay of memories, or simply playing audiovisual recordings, to create a novel experience

that also sparks curiosity and meaningful engagement with an archive of remembered play and games. Our focus was on both emerging digital technologies and novel uses of current physical devices to provide us with the possibility to shape the interface in ways that were not previously possible. In this way, redundant physical and historical objects can come back to life, bringing their own affordances and nostalgia.

The complex system on the other side of the interface is, in terms of human–computer interaction, the users – in this instance, children between the ages of 7 and 11 years. A signal concern with regard to our project was that, first, primary school children wouldn't be interested in engaging with technology with which they were already familiar in a museum or art gallery setting; and that, second, the 'interfacial regime' (to draw once again on Bratton) of the contemporary graphical user interface (GUI) of digital devices would flatten the temporal distance between the contemporary moment and the past conveyed through the archival materials. This flattening would be caused, in essence, by a series of systems that allowed the translation of time and space and the replay of memories from the past via systems that make them seem as if they are in the present.

Handling the physical archive necessarily entails an engagement with the practices of retrieval, cataloguing and conservation attendant to paper documents. This establishes a tangible, physical connection between the past moment of recording and the contemporary retrieval of that document. The texture of the paper, its smell and the fact that it is not possible to search the physical archive, means to engage with these materials in a way which is historically conditioned and, moreover, unavailable to most people. Using auratic technologies contemporaneous with the archival materials under inquiry, such as the rotary telephone, offered a different way to connect people tangibly with the past through embodied interaction and memory. The discussion that follows considers how these contemporaneous technologies reoriented visitors in time, as interfacial archaeologies enabling a sensory exploration of the past, thereby bridging the temporal divide, enabling intergenerational conversations and fostering a deeper understanding of the selected archive material collected by Iona and Peter Opie.

Interface archaeology

For the games designer and philosopher Ian Bogost, the term 'carpentry' designates a process of 'constructing artefacts as a philosophical practice'

(2012: 92). That is, building things allows us to explore ideas, objects and the relations between them in ways which would be impossible if we restricted ourselves to reading and writing about them.

Bearing this approach in mind, in our strand of Playing the Archive, we had a number of questions, some of which were very practical, and some of which are more speculative. Practical issues might be, for example, what are the best ways to take a predominantly textual archive, like that of the Opies, and represent it using digital technologies for museum audiences? Or what affordances do the visual, auditory or haptic capacities of these technologies offer for immersing people in the lifeworld that the Opie Archive describes? On the more speculative end of the spectrum, what does the process of devising answers to these questions tell us about the Opie Archive, and what can the Opie Archive itself tell us about these technologies?

As many ethnographers of childhood have identified, children's play crosses digital and physical divides. Clapping games, for example, are now transmitted through traditional face-to-face rehearsal, but also through YouTube (Bishop, 2014), while friendship groups extend and are mediated through multiplayer online games (Marsh, 2014). Children's play tends to incorporate material from across the media they are exposed to, and, moreover, crosses boundaries between online and offline spaces (Burn, 2014: 31).

The role of technology in this process is a source of novelty, as new technologies, platforms, games and media change the forms and content of play. While new technologies always come with a degree of hype around them, as demonstrated by the repeated waves of interest gained and lost in VR technologies over the past 50 years, they tend to become banal as they become more commonplace. The ubiquitous technology of the touch screen is a prime example of this phenomenon. This familiarity effect is especially acute for children, who often grow up surrounded by such technologies. In the early twenty-first century, a child in reception class in Britain does not know a world without the touch screen, a technology without widespread application until 2007, with the introduction of the iPhone. One could speculate that it might be difficult for children and young people to *see* these technologies, as it becomes harder to take a critical distance from a device as it becomes more ubiquitous. If tablets have been enthusiastically embraced by our child researchers, ultimately, they are everyday items used to watch videos and listen to music, do homework and play videogames and share content with their peers.

A rotary telephone, on the other hand, is unusual. Its modes of interaction are unfamiliar and, moreover, they are not readily

discoverable through the use of existing, ubiquitous technologies. For comparison, we can consider the responses of children to a VR headset, brought into primary schools in London and Sheffield to demonstrate some of the solutions we were testing during a workshop for Playing the Archive. Very few of the children had firsthand experience of using VR headsets. However, the availability and accessibility of a wide variety of video content provided and mediated their understanding of the technologies, to the extent that we needed to provide very little instruction to our young researchers on how to use the device. Having become obsolete before the advent of social media, the rotary phone has no equivalent online presence. For a child, this outmoded technology needs to be discovered and learned, whereas the more refined and commonplace touch-screen interface does not. Through this strangeness, the rotary phone becomes more visible.

At least part of this *seeing* of technology comes down to a question of interfaces. Interfaces shape what we expect of technology and, in turn, they shape us and our conception of the world. As with other representations, in this sense they are ideological; yet to draw on Benjamin Bratton, what makes an interface different from a drawing or a photograph is that it also has the capacity to act 'back' on what it represents. An interface mediates to us what a given piece of technology can do, allows us to act through it, and communicates to us whatever it is that it interfaces to has done. Bratton puts it pithily:

Once an image can be used to control what it represents, it too becomes technology: diagram plus computation equals interface. As a computationally intensive interface, the image is not only a picture of the network; it is also an instrument through which a user of this image-interface can effect change back on that network. (Bratton, 2016: 220–2)

Bratton, here, is referring specifically to the GUI – the paradigm of mouse, keyboard, desktop, applications and windows and touch screen – as the predominant mode through which people interact with computers today. A GUI connects a series of visual and verbal symbols with a series of available calculations and functions in a given computing system. The problem is that this paradigm is so successful that it is to all intents and purposes invisible; it is so ubiquitous that it appears, through repeated usage, to be 'natural'.

The naturalisation of everyday computing technology is supported through our work with the children on Playing the Archive. Part of

the ethnographic strand of the project involved working with child researchers at three primary schools in London and Sheffield. The children were given iPads through which to document their play, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they had very little difficulty in performing this task, and, again, through their exposure to YouTube videos, understood how to operate and perform to the inbuilt camera. While the new technology was enthusiastically embraced, it was clearly familiar and ordinary to the children we engaged.

Different interfaces have distinct temporalities. In *The Language of New Media*, media theorist Lev Manovich (2001) observes that spatialisation – the ‘privileging of space over time’ characteristic of the postmodern moment – is itself mirrored by computer-based media. Digital media replace ‘sequential storage with random-access storage; hierarchical organisation of information with flattened hypertext; [and] psychological movement of narrative in novels and cinema with physical movement through space’ (Manovich, 2001: 78). The GUI, with its non-linear grammar of copying and pasting, clicking, dragging and tapping, is an embodiment of this spatialised temporality. Our concern, therefore, was firstly the practical consideration that children wouldn’t be interested in using technologies in a museum if they already had access to them at home; and secondly, the question of how the temporalities of AR, VR and mixed-reality technologies might affect museum visitors’ experiences of the gap in time between them and the historical materials with which they engage.

Older technologies possess an auratic charge that presents affordances in this regard, but they were never built to convey digital experiences, and their functionality is limited. In conceiving a museum display utilising a rotary phone to engage visitors with digital archives of children’s play, the main technical challenges were in bridging this gap between form and functionality. Fortunately, the development of distributed and ubiquitous computing presented us with a relatively affordable solution.

Technology in disguise: the *Time Telephone*

The *Time Telephone* installation comprises a wooden replica of the iconic red telephone kiosk K6, housing an original rotary phone, retrofitted to enable audiences to listen to digital audio extracts of children describing their play. Designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1935, the kiosk K6 maintains an emotional and nostalgic significance within the British

streetscape. Though originally equipped with rotary dial phones, this technology was replaced in the late 1960s by push-button phones. While still remembered by people born in the 1980s and earlier, the rotary technology is broadly unfamiliar to younger generations.

Using a lightweight, flat-pack replica of the phone box enabled us to make the installation mobile and adaptable to different locations. The structure and interior could be easily customised to the aesthetic and technical needs of the project, as well as to accommodate safety considerations in showcasing the project to families and the general public. In staging the interior of the telephone box as an interactive installation, we designed instructions for using the rotary dial, a list of available phone numbers, alongside the title of the corresponding recording, and a map of Britain highlighting the areas and cities where the recordings were made. An original rotary dial telephone from the early 1970s, the model GPO 746, was retrofitted by the research team with a single-board computer to play prerecorded sounds. This was placed on a bespoke shelf to one side of the back panel of the booth, beneath the user instructions, telephone directory, map and a brief summary of the project (Figure 7.2).

The model of rotary phone deployed for this project was not the one usually installed in telephone boxes across the UK, but rather the device that was provided by British Telecom (BT) and so commonly found in households. The reason for this choice was partly due to the difficulty in sourcing the rotary payphone fitted in early versions of the K6 kiosk. In fact, there were also challenges in retrieving multiple GPO 746 telephones, as there is a more widely available replica which shares the overall aesthetic of the original model, but delivers a very different tactile and auditory experience.

In appealing to the embodied sense memories of audiences, the *Time Telephone* utilised the shell of an original rotary phone to conceal a single-board computer and the wiring needed to connect the rotary dial, the telephone handset and an additional ceiling speaker to the single-board computer.

The process of miniaturisation, increased computational power, and reduced energy requirements of single-board computers have revolutionised interactivity and prototyping in recent years. With operational components requiring significantly less space, designers are afforded greater flexibility in creating enclosures or shells for these devices. Moreover, the programmable capabilities of single-board computers, such as Raspberry Pi or Arduino, make it possible to introduce novel features or revamp existing ones in a wide range of applications.



Figure 7.2 Interior setup of the *Time Telephone*, the map of Britain, the telephone directory and the instructions to use the phone installed on the plywood panel on the back of the kiosk. The rotary phone and some additional materials are located on the shelf on the right. Not visible in the image is the loudspeaker panel on the top of the kiosk used to replicate the audio of the headset. © Valerio Signorelli.

The design of the interior appearance of the telephone box, as well as the selection of the accounts of play to include in the directory and the user experience of the phone, was part of an active co-design process conducted during 2018 and 2019 with the primary schools that collaborated in the

research project, Ysgol Gymraeg Treganna (Cardiff), St Machar Academy (Aberdeen) and one London primary school, and the curators of the Young V&A (formerly V&A Museum of Childhood). Our group of young collaborators re-enacted, interpreted and recorded a selection of 51 accounts of play from the Opie Archive. During the workshops, the young collaborators provided valuable suggestions for the accessibility of the *Time Telephone* and the enhancement of the audience experience of it, knowing that it was to be presented to the public at the Young V&A. For example, they proposed to provide some additional audio recordings to inform the museum visitors about the number they dialled, along with a message in case the museum visitor dialled a wrong number, with both of these messages informed by historical BT messages. It is thanks to such observations and feedback that an additional loudspeaker was added to the telephone box, making the experience more inclusive and allowing more people at one time to experience the playback of the recordings. In addition to the recordings made by our young collaborators, the British Library granted us use of 17 original recordings from 'The Opie Collection of Children's Games and Songs', made by Iona Opie between 1969 and 1983 (British Library, 2022). Each of the resulting 68 recordings was saved on the retrofitted device using as a filename the year in which the recordings were taken, for the original recordings, or the year in which the accounts of play were collected. By dialling the correct number, the correspondent recording was played via the headset and the loudspeaker of the kiosk. This configuration allowed us to add new recordings with ease and to expand the list of recordings if needed.

The *Time Telephone* was installed from April to December 2019 at the Young V&A in London, with the major event of the Festival of Play taking place from 20 to 21 July 2019. A second phone box was displayed at Site Gallery, Sheffield, from June to July 2019, to coincide with the 55th UK Literacy Association International Conference in Sheffield focused on 'Literacy and Play for All: Improvisation, possibility and imagination'.

During the nine months of the exhibition at the Young V&A, the *Time Telephone* was extensively used by both young people and adults, with thousands of calls made. The developed code, which controlled the playback of the audio files on the single-board computer, also provided a basic analytics system. This system was designed to gain insights into the visitor interactions with the rotary phone and to record the numbers that were dialled most frequently. Among these, the original recording provided by the British Library titled 'A Fart Went Rolling Down the Street' was especially popular. Museum visitors made over 50 dials

per day from the numbers listed in the accompanying *Playing the Archive* phone directory, along with hundreds of general interactions. An interaction was logged whenever a visitor dialled an incomplete number, or a number not associated with a recording. During the busiest days of the Festival of Play, we reach a peak of 150 calls to numbers listed in the directory. From our own observations, together with those made by the front-of-house museum staff, audience interactions with the *Time Telephone* as a form of play equipment far exceeded the use of the telephone as an interface to access archival recordings. The anachronistic presence of the phone booth in the museum spaces acted as a trigger for contrasting experiences among different generations of visitors, with older generations being transported to a common activity of the past via the use of the rotary phone, likely sparking memories of childhood further suggested by the content of the recordings stored in the device. Meanwhile, younger generations discovered games of the past by using – which is to say, playing, making imaginary calls and interacting with the device both as anticipated and also in ways that we did not plan – an interface that was unfamiliar to them, having been replaced by smartphones (Figure 7.3).



Figure 7.3 The *Time Telephone* was installed at the entrance of the Young V&A. It served as an interface to access the Opie Archive and was also used as a piece of play equipment by the young visitors to the museum. © Valerio Signorelli.

Testing the *Time Telephone* in the museum space posed multiple challenges, as the digital exhibit needed to maintain reliability and function seamlessly, particularly on the days with the highest number of visitors. Throughout the entire testing period, only two interventions were required to repair two broken diallers and replace the worn paper telephone directory. This minimal need for maintenance given the intensive use of the device is attributable in large part to the robust design of the original rotary phone, which underwent several design iterations to be able to endure repeated and prolonged usage over decades.

Following the Festival of Play and the 55th UKLA International Conference, the two *Time Telephone* installations were relocated to the UCL Institute of Education building on Bedford Way, London, and to the University of Sheffield. In 2023, a third *Time Telephone* was developed and installed at the new UCL East campus at Marshgate building. All three *Time Telephone* installations remain operational and accessible, serving as tangible memories of the Playing the Archive project even after its conclusion.

Sense of Play

AR is a form of immersive technology and refers to the technique of combining the digital world with the physical one, essentially by overlaying digital features, in the form of 3D models, images and sounds, onto a real-time video feed or pass-through display, and thereby augmenting the real-world experience (Azuma et al., 2001). There are two main approaches to accessing augmented experiences using mobile devices such as smartphones – namely, ‘marker-based’ and ‘markerless-based’ (Pucihar and Coulton, 2013). In the marker-based experience, a physical trigger, usually in the form of a printed image, is recognised by the mobile device when in the field of view of the camera feed and used as a reference point to locate the AR experience. Depending on the frameworks used to develop the AR application, the images required different features and degrees of complexity. In the ‘markerless-based’ approach, the target is replaced by a simplified digital version of the actual environment, generated in real time by the camera feed of the device used, or preloaded by the user, as a reference to the application to locate digital objects that overlay the camera feed itself.

The use of AR, as a way to overlay and access ephemeral digital presence linked to specific locations or to specific objects, has been widely explored in recent decades (Azuma et al., 2001; Höllerer et al., 1999;

Sutherland, 1968), revealing its potential as a method for engaging with different communities. Compared with other forms of visualisation of memories – for instance, using placards and panels, such as the Historic England’s national blue plaque – the content of an AR experience is not immediately visible or accessible, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the creative communication of memories (Schult, 2020; Sauter et al., 2018). In the first instance, the augmented experience is encountered by means of a placeholder – the marker – to be revealed only subsequently through the action of the user in accessing the intangible, digital medium. The success of AR requires the intentional engagement of the user to activate the memory itself. The marker, as the object that enables the augmented experience, is often considered merely a trigger for the digital experience, without any inherent meaning or communicative value. Our work, by contrast, set out to use the marker differently: the illustrations used are not immediately recognised as markers, but rather, they serve as an effective bridge to the digital and physical manifestation of memories (Lovett and Signorelli, 2024). In the context of the Playing the Archive project, this approach was explored with the *Sense of Play* intervention.

A series of workshops were organised between the Playing the Archive team, the Site Gallery team in Sheffield (Sharna Jackson, Greg Povey, Robyn Haddon and Lydia Lapinski) and the primary schools involved in the project. As a result of these activities, a deck of playing cards was chosen as the means to bridge physical and digital accounts of play from the Opie Archive. The face of each card was used to display a play activity, with the back displaying the marker used to trigger the AR experience, which in this case took the form of a digital animation.

Similar to the process used to develop the *Time Telephone*, the Sheffield team of Playing the Archive selected a set of 12 games from the Opie Archive. Those accounts of play activities were summarised in the form of short texts, bullet points and a series of pictograms to present the number of players (i.e. if the play activity was indoor or outdoor, an action or a guessing game). This content was depicted on the front of the playing cards.

On the reverse, the marker had to follow specific constraints required by the technology used, but these constraints offered enough flexibility for the team of the Site Gallery to develop unique and visually striking designs, in the form of stylised and overlapping playground markings (e.g. hopscotch; snakes and ladders), which was then divided into 12 smaller squares, used to trigger the AR experience (Figure 7.4).

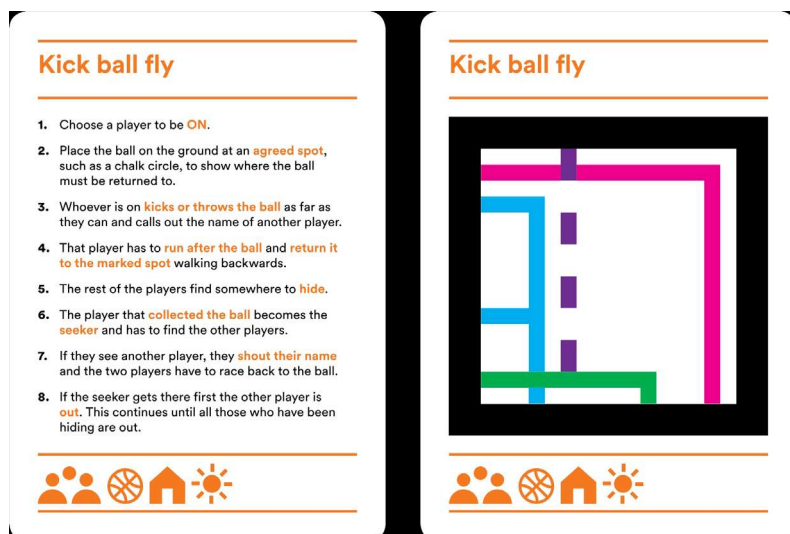


Figure 7.4 A playing card from *Sense of Play*. The front of the card summarises the game ‘Kick ball fly’, a game to play in a group, with a ball, in both indoor and outdoor settings. The back of the card is the marker used to trigger the AR content. © Valerio Signorelli.

The AR experience brought into play a series of characters designed by the artist Lydia Lapinski and inspired by the aesthetics of the period in which the Opies collected most of their works (1950s and 1960s). The characters were animated using Adobe Character Animator and voiced by a group of six young people from the Growtheatre Youth Theatre (2012), who were recorded during a series of workshops conducted by the Sheffield team, Alison Somerset-Ward and Julia Bishop, at Site Gallery.

The use of AR content is not exclusive, but rather alternative. In the same way the face of the card reveals the rules and games in a synthetic and pictorial way, the animation triggered through interaction with the reverse of the card provides an analogous description, but in this case conveyed through the spoken word, as audio. This approach allowed the user to access the content of the cards using different modalities, without preventing their use in the event of no mobile device being available (Figure 7.5).

At the time of the project, the primary frameworks available for creating AR experiences were ARCore by Google and ARKit by Apple. These solutions require the applications to be published on their relative stores to make them accessible to users. While this is a common approach, it can sometimes hinder access to the experience due to an

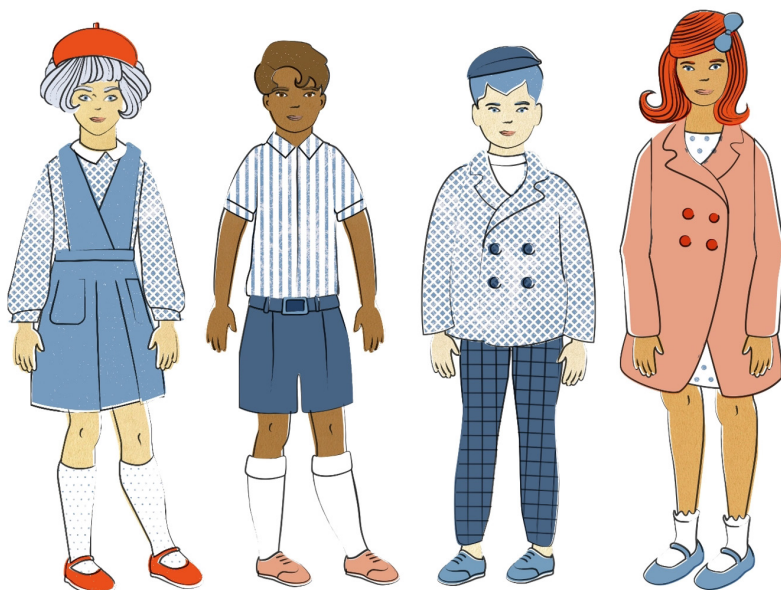


Figure 7.5 The four characters designed by Lydia Lapinski, animated by Valerio Signorelli and voiced by six young people from the Growtheatre Youth Theatre. © UCL.

unwillingness or inability to install new applications on the part of the intended user, as was highlighted during our workshops with the Young V&A. To overcome this potential barrier to participation, we explored a different approach, using WebAR solutions. Since a WebAR application is essentially a website, it does not need to be installed as a native application. If the device meets the minimum requirements, a prompt will ask the user permission to access the camera feed and the orientation sensors prior to starting the experience.

We chose AR.js (2023) as our primary library. This is an open-source JavaScript framework based on ARToolkit, a well-known framework developed in 1999 (Kato and Billinghurst, 1999) and open-sourced in 2001. There are no significant differences between native and web-based applications in terms of usability, but WebAR applications have additional technical limitations regarding the complexity of the visualised content and compatibility, even though these restrictions are quickly being resolved. For example, during the development of the application, iOS devices required an extra step to access the experience. However, this limitation has been addressed in the latest version of the WebAR framework.

To ensure that the WebAR framework was fit for the needs of the project, we built a series of prototypes. Our primary concern was whether we could use multiple markers to match the number of digital objects selected for *Sense of Play*. Initial tests revealed AR.js to be both feasible and effective (Signorelli, 2020). We linked the digital content, which consisted of voiced animations of the drawings, to each marker. To create the impression that the characters were genuinely part of the environment and not merely a flat surface displaying an animation, the video backgrounds were removed from the AR content using the chroma key screen technique. The chroma key technique is a visual effects process where a specific colour range from a scene, often a bright green or blue, is selected and then made transparent, allowing a different image or video to be inserted in its place. This technique is commonly used in film and TV production (Figure 7.6). A welcome screen was included in the WebAR application to introduce the project and provide instructions on how to use the application.

The intervention was presented to the public on 29 June 2019, together with a temporary AR playground in the city centre of Sheffield, and during the Festival of Play at the Young V&A in July 2019.

Despite the limitations of the web-based solution, the *Sense of Play* intervention, in both physical and digital form, successfully explored a new method for conveying memories and suggesting play activities.



Figure 7.6 The digital characters' animation blends into the environment seamlessly, thanks to the transparency of their background using the chroma key technique. © Valerio Signorelli.

It highlighted the link between physical and digital play, but it also revealed some important limitations. While a web-based approach may offer alternative methods for accessing the experience, it is intrinsically tied to its online presence, requiring network coverage and connectivity from the user. Additionally, keeping the website operational and up to date with changes required by the still-experimental WebAR frameworks and advancements introduced in new models of mobile devices demands ongoing technical support for the project to be sustainable over the medium to long term.

Just as the *Time Telephone* requires an action from the visitor to access the embedded play memories, the cards ask for a similar player activation. This is done using the graphic marker on the back of the card and the player's own mobile device. The digital overlay, brought to life through the use of AR, offers an alternative yet complementary method for accessing the selected archive material. The combined use of textual descriptions and digital content allowed the players to access the content of the cards using various modalities, without preventing their use in the event of no mobile device being available.

The cards invite the visitor to engage with the archive, offering suggestions for activities that can be carried out indoors or outdoors, in groups or pairs, with or without additional tools. The instructions, which are loosely outlined on the face of the card, and narrated in greater detail by the digital AR character, are not prescriptive. Instead, they aim to keep the memories of play alive, by embedding the play activities of previous generations with current ones, thereby perpetuating memories through play.

Conclusion: sensory, multimodal interfaces

Through the Playing the Archive project we had a unique opportunity to explore the role of interfaces both in providing access to the extensive collection of content linked to the Opie Archive, and also in their capacity to invite, stimulate and enable embodied re-enactments of the past, thereby fostering a dialogue with current play activities. The two interfaces presented here served as multimodal vessels for conveying the archival materials meticulously collected by Iona and Peter Opie, while also calling up personal sense memories linked to the auratic, aesthetic and tactile qualities of the interactive objects. Although further investigations are still needed, we believe that the two installations – the *Time Telephone* and *Sense of Play* – created a more intimate relationship

and an enriched experience with the archival material through the temporal overlapping of memories and the interfaces, and the use of the sound modality. The intergenerational connections facilitated by these prototypes allowed for a mutual transfer of knowledge between adults and young children: learning from games and rhymes that have been forgotten, discovering their evolution over time, and sharing memories through the use of ordinary objects and actions.

The connection formed through the use of interfaces was not restricted to exhibition visitors; it was also present during the development process through co-creation activities conducted by the research team and young participants from primary schools involved in the project. During these activities, the interfaces served as research tools to compare and contrast play activities collected by the Opies with the practices observed in contemporary school playgrounds, and to initiate discussion about the evolution of games.

While the content delivered via our two prototypes was central to our project, the technology played an active role in shaping the audience's encounter with that material. However, we took care to ensure the balance between *old* and *new*, where the technology did not overshadow or dominate the content, but instead worked to tease out and activate the multisensory dimension of the games captured in the Opie Archive. Through the technology layer, for example, the clapping games described in text can also be experienced through their rhythmic, acoustic and sensory effects. The device conceals the technology, which nonetheless remains available to the users when they choose to engage with the hidden, digital layer of the experience. Therefore, with the *Time Telephone*, the rotary phone functions as a conduit for stories in its own right, but also allows audiences to listen to recorded memories.

Meanwhile, with the deck of cards created for *Sense of Play*, players may choose to engage with the cards themselves and the games described on their faces, but also to access the digital archival material through AR interaction with the reverse. The interface does not demand that the content be consumed in a particular way, as an imposition, but rather allows for multiple and different modes of interaction through its affordance as a play object. That is to say, the devices used for our prototypes to convey memories of play themselves become playable objects. For example, the adult visitors recognised that the *Time Telephone*, in the context of the museum space, is not an actual telephone booth connected in any conventional sense to the telecommunications network, but they nonetheless approached the device in the installation

as its affordances suggested, evoking feelings of nostalgia, personal connections and associations with places to engage memory.

Across these examples, the strategy of concealment helps to minimise any potential anxiety or hesitation that users may have towards the hidden technology, leaving a familiar device with known affordances on the surface. However, the act of concealment also places an obligation on the researcher to provide a thorough explanation of how the technology is operating, both before and after the user interaction. This transparency ensures that users can comprehend the technology's role in conveying the content, and trust that it is being utilised ethically and for social benefit.

In terms of affordance and accessibility, the two case studies presented have employed co-design methods throughout the entire process. These approaches were used to both build the content and define the technical solutions using open-source frameworks or affordable devices. Our primary interest was to ensure the use of accessible solutions that can be reproduced and re-employed in other projects, even beyond the conclusion of the project. In both cases, the focus was on the interface as the relationship between the user and the object through experience, rather than a technical device used as a passive display. Additionally, the ability to rapidly prototype changes during the discussion of the project with final users of any age was an important factor. It allowed for immediate feedback and iterative improvements, ensuring the solutions were tailored to, and reflected the needs and preferences of, the participants of the project and the visitors of the exhibitions.

The use of multimodality was a critical aspect of the project as well. It allowed for the communication of information that would not be possible using written text alone, such as the rhythms and rhymes of clapping games. The evocative medium of audio, in particular, was used to engage the user, and the use of auditory stimuli defined a pace to follow, asking the user to dedicate time to the experience. Based on the interactions we collected with *Time Telephone* during the exhibition at the Young V&A, we observed that the combined use of the haptic and sonic experiences enriched the process of accessing the archive material. Adults were seen guiding the younger visitors on how to use the rotary phone, which added a layer of intergenerational interaction to the experience.

Unfortunately, our *Sense of Play* case study did not include any analytics monitoring system. This omission prevented us from gaining a comprehensive understanding of how WebAR was used beyond the events organised during the project. There are now various solutions

available – for example, the open-source web analytics platform Matomo (2024) – that can be deployed to safely monitor these interactions while respecting user privacy, and which may be considered for use in similar projects.

The integration of archival data with advanced and yet familiar interface technologies has led to a fundamental shift in the way we interface with memories. By storing memories directly within machines, it is possible to interpret, replay and recall these memories with unprecedented ease and flexibility, encouraging intergenerational storytelling as an additional, incidental activation of memory.

However, what our project shows is the additional value to be found in exploring the sensory embodiments and multimodal resonances of the interfaces themselves, and their potential to contribute to shaping meaningful encounters with digital archives. As we move into the future, the potential for recording and replaying memories will continue to expand. New and retrofitted devices, as well as environmental integrations, will enable memory reconstruction and retransmission, creating an immersive playback experience. This fusion of technology and human experience continues to shape the ways we interact with memories, interjecting the past into present, and inevitably offering new creative opportunities.

At the outset of this project, our aim was to discover the best technological interfaces for enabling multisensory engagement with the predominantly textual Opie Archive. We were also curious about what the technologies we used might reveal to us about text-based archives in general, and the Opie Archive in particular. As possible co-creative responses to these guiding questions, the *Time Telephone* and *Sense of Play* playing cards indicate the affordances of sound as a medium for connecting audiences across time to accounts of children's play. While enabling multisensory engagement (including vision and touch), our interventions prioritised the auditory and children's voices as most closely aligned with the games and the modes of their transmission in the playground.

We are aware that this process of re-enactment – through removing the texts from the archive and reinserting them into the schoolyard – introduces an extra layer of mediation. For example, compared with the recordings conducted by Iona Opie, the contemporary readings by children from schools around the UK can only provide an impression of the intonations, accents, rhymes and songs of previous generations. Nevertheless, the recordings are evocative and have succeeded in initiating intergenerational conversations, which have the potential in

turn to inform and supplement the existing archive. Through making sensible the temporal distance between *then* and *now*, the interleaving of historical recordings with original recordings featuring re-enactments of archival texts enables comparisons that reveal the similarities and changes in play. Moreover, these acts of embodied re-enactment – both in terms of the children vocalising the archive and the researchers recording them – rehearse the intergenerational transmission and transformation of gameplay itself.

The interfaces we developed during the Playing the Archive project indicate the broader potential for deploying technology to communicate multimodal archive materials. Our initial exploration was driven by the interest in further supporting the ethnographic research conducted by the project team, which focused on investigating changes in play activities within playgrounds.

We aimed to provide the project team with the necessary tools to initiate discussions with primary school children about the dynamics of play activities and how they evolve over time, and in the context of museums we fostered dialogues across different generations. An aspect of the project that we could not fully explore, and which remains an area for further investigation and development, was the possibility of conceiving the interfaces as active tools for data collection. Recalling Benjamin's (2006: 338) observation that auratic objects are invested with the ability to look back at us, it is possible to imagine interfacial technologies for expanding the capture of play activities, contributing to a process of auto-archiving and keeping the archive alive.

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Part III

Play in space and time

8

Spaces for play: beyond street and playground

Helen Woolley and Alison Somerset-Ward

‘Where children are is where they play’

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 10)

Where children play in outdoor environments: perceived and actualised affordances

When asking children about their play, Iona and Peter Opie did not explicitly ask about where the children played. The nearest they came to this was in the question, ‘tell about a favourite game in street or playground’. Nevertheless, the rich accounts of context and history in their books do present telling insights into spaces of play. Their most extensive discussion of the places where children play in the particular historical moment in which they were researching occurs in *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (1969). In the Introduction, the Opies consider the importance of the post-war urban spaces of play; the negative effects of adult efforts to renew these spaces; the unintended constraints imposed by bespoke places for play; and the importance to children of secret places and wastelands, as well as forbidden, risky spaces such as bomb sites, roads and railway lines. The further we look into both the archive and the Opies’ books, the more we can see that children provided direct evidence about the outdoor spaces for play in the writings and drawings, offering a rich understanding of their knowledge and use of the outdoor environment. Accordingly, our focus in this chapter is on the Archive node of the Circuit of Play described in [Chapter 1](#), and how it indicates the relationship between children’s play repertoires and their physical spaces of play. Our aim is to understand

something of the outdoor spaces children in the post-war period chose and used for their play practices, with reference to some of the work of *Playing the Archive*: the archive itself and some of the published words of Iona and Peter Opie.

As landscape architects, we are specifically interested in the important question of *where* and *how* children play and have played in outdoor environments; and we acknowledge that this can be, at least partly, understood and underpinned with theory which has developed and evolved over many years. Particularly relevant theories are *affordance*, first proposed by Gibson (1979) and *constructed and found space* (Woolley, 2015). These theories will be discussed before we consider some examples from the Opie Archive to explore how these theories can be understood and applied to the experiences of the children responding to the Opies' research.

The psychologist James J. Gibson introduced the theory of affordance in term of aspects of the relationship of animals with their environment. His underlying proposition is that 'The affordance of the environment is what it offers the animal, for good or ill. ... It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment' (Gibson, 1979: 1). Gibson suggested that each animal species has its own distinctive *way of life* in an environment called a *niche*, and that animals actively modify their niches (Gibson, 1979). He goes on to explain that 'a niche refers to *how* an animal lives rather than to *where* it lives. I suggest that a niche is a set of affordances' (Gibson, 1979: 128). It has been suggested that with respect to humans, as distinct from other animals, the concept of a way of life can be understood in relation to different practices in different cultures or groups, the variety of practices reflecting different ways of life for humans (Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014).

Ways of life have also been understood within cultural studies, most notably by Raymond Williams, whose formulation of popular culture, or 'common culture', he presented as 'a whole way of life' (Williams, 1961). Children's play, and the way of life in which it is embedded, can be seen as a specific form of popular culture. Furthermore, as the Opies extensively documented, children's folklore itself drew on other aspects of children's cultural worlds, in particular their media experiences, and this has since intensified, as Potter and Cowan demonstrate in [Chapter 6](#). More specifically in relation to spaces, Marsh and Bishop show in [Chapter 9](#) how ways of life become encoded in wayfaring lines, or, as June Factor expressed it, 'playlines' (Factor, 2014: 142).

Returning to the concept of affordances, it has been suggested that these can be *potential* and *actualised*. A potential affordance is

when someone perceives that there can be a relationship between a person and the environment (Kyttä, 2004). An actualised affordance is when someone acts on the relationship with the environment which they have perceived as a possibility (Heft, 1988). One example of this is skateboarders who see the potential affordance for undertaking a trick in association with an element of the urban environment and then undertake the appropriate trick. For skateboarders, elements such as steps, a handrail, the edge of a seat or bench, or the top of a small wall are all opportunities for them to actualise the potential affordance of a trick (Woolley and Johns, 2001; Woolley, 2015). Such elements in the outdoor environment were obviously not designed and built for skateboarders but for other reasons: steps to allow people to walk up and down a change of level; a handrail to be used by people for whom the support it provides would be helpful; a seat or bench for sitting upon; a top of a wall to support differences in level or perhaps planting behind the wall. As well as elements within an outdoor environment providing affordances for people, outdoor spaces in their entirety can do this. The incursion of skateboarders into these spaces can be an unplanned sharing of space; or even a deliberate transgression of conventionally designated uses (Burn and Parker, 2003). Once again, the Opies also observed the collision between adult intentions for public spaces and children's appropriation of them: 'Windows are liable to be broken, caretakers appear from blocks of flats telling the children to keep off the grass, obstinate car-drivers insist on making their way down the street' (Opie and Opie, 1969: 10). Elsewhere, they emphasise the contrast between the fixed constructions of adult uses of the environment and children's fluid, adaptive playful uses: 'Unlike the obtrusive spots of grown men, for which ground has to be permanently set aside and perpetually tended, children's games are ones which the players adapt to their surroundings and the time available' (Opie and Opie, 1969: 14–15).

A final consideration in relation to affordances is suggested in Chapter 1 of this volume by Burn, in relation to children's playground games based on their videogame play. It borrows four principles of affordance from Murray (2011: 51–86): *spatial, encyclopaedic, participatory and procedural*.

Spatial affordances self-evidently apply to the streets, playgrounds and wastelands described by the Opies. 'Encyclopaedic' requires more thought, but suggests novel ways to consider the wealth of material in these environments, from the lampposts and roadlines considered later in this chapter, to the profusion of material objects we have observed in

playful use: mud, grass, sticks, stones, planks, trees, leaves, ropes and so on. 'Participatory' also provokes novel ideas: affordances to participate, both in the environment – inhabiting, peopling, activating those spaces – and with others in the social aspects of play.

'Procedural' is the affordance which may be considered to be the least intuitive in relation to the Opie Archive. It is well known as an aspect of videogame play, referring to the rule sets encoded in the games that allow for playful challenges, obstacles, narrative routes, contest and resolution. However, it seems entirely reasonable to propose that one set of affordances children find in the playable landscape is precisely of this nature. A road with two sides to cross, suggesting rules of contest, opposition, transition; a road or railway line with a vehicle either approaching or not; a patch of wasteland indicating linear and circular routes of progression: all of these and countless others suggest the procedural affordances of games.

Where children play in outdoor environments: found and constructed spaces

Children and young people often find that the spaces which are specifically provided for them in outdoor environments do not support all their needs. This was clearly understood by Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect and campaigner for children's rights, working and writing at a similar time to the Opies. Not only did she introduce the concept of adventure playgrounds to England but also her observations and knowledge of children and young people led her to comment: 'Planning for their [children's] play involves the design of the whole neighbourhood, not just the playgrounds, for children do not play only in playgrounds – they play where they move' (Hurtwood, 1968: 23). Further critiquing the paucity of experience and play opportunities in constructed playgrounds of the post-Second World War period, Lady Allen comments:

The majority of existing playgrounds are still of the level asphalt type, with fixed equipment chosen from an ironmongers' catalogue. Rarely is there grass, or trees, or flowers, or animals, or any beauty. Children are increasingly condemned to live in a harsh, stark, desert of hard surfacing. This antiseptic approach kills play stone dead.

(Hurtwood, 1968: 18)

The Opies also make this point forcefully in the Introduction to *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, observing specifically how, in their view, adult surveillance in constructed spaces inhibited play and its designed environment served almost as a punitive constraint: 'The places specially made for children's play are also the places where children can most easily be watched playing: the asphalt expanses of school playgrounds, the cage-like enclosures filled with junk by a local authority' (Opie and Opie, 1969: 12). By contrast, they depict the 'wastelands' in which children often prefer to play, where they find what we now call affordances for play: 'To a child there is more joy in a rubbish tip than a flowering rockery, in a fallen tree than a piece of statuary, in muddy path than a gravel track' (Opie and Opie, 1969: 12).

A range of other researchers seeking to understand the relationship of children and outdoor environments were influenced by the work of the Opies, understanding that 'where children are is where they play'. Colin Ward, Roger Hart and Robin Moore all produced seminal books influencing future research. Ward used a multitude of photographic evidence to capture the variety and richness of outdoor environments, and elements within them, that children used for their play practices. Hart (1979) and Moore (1986) undertook structured research revealing the extent of the neighbourhoods that children were using, with Hart introducing the concept of 'free range' (1979: 44), later understood as 'home range' and then 'children's independent mobility', and Moore introducing the concept of 'Habitual, Frequented and Occasional ranges' (1986: 17). All these works laid the foundation of methods and concepts for a wide range of research and many rigorously reviewed articles in subsequent years.

As others before him, Ward (1978) commented that just because an area was designated by adults as somewhere for children to play, there was no guarantee that children would play there and that areas and features not provided for play would be used for play. This has been repeatedly reasserted by other research. In England government research in the 1960s and 1970s about children's use of outdoor spaces in housing areas revealed that children played on roads, pavements, paved areas, public grass areas and access areas; in car parks, wildlife areas and planted areas; and on walls, fences and flat roofs of garages (Hole, 1966; Department of Environment, 1973). Paths in housing areas have been repeatedly identified as important for children's play, partly because of the affordance for riding bicycles and scooters (Hurtwood, 1968; Hole, 1966; Department of Environment, 1973; Whewey and Millward, 1997; Allen et al., 2005). Other non-governmental research has revealed that

traffic-calming measures, street closures, walls and driveways and grass areas set back from the road are used for play in housing areas (Wheway and Millward, 1997). Meanwhile, individual gardens (Francis, 1995) and communal gardens and courtyards (Rasmussen, 2004) also support children's play in outdoor environments.

Most recently, Winder argues that playgrounds in the 1950s had become 'one component of what Simon Gunn has described as a banal urban modernism, one that emphasises functionality rather than the iconic' (Winder, 2024: 132). As others before him, he affirms that children's use of outdoor spaces and environments that have not been specifically designed or built for them is long recorded in research. Spaces chosen by children for their affordances for play often stand in opposition to spaces constructed for play (with the best of intentions) by adults, spaces which have a complex history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular (Winder, 2024).

Throughout these writings and illustrations, children have been interviewed about and observed in, and have represented in drawings, the wide variety of spaces which are not designed for play but which are used in this way; and these are *found* spaces (Woolley, 2015), which might consist of maintained, unmaintained and natural areas (Heseltine and Holborn, 1987). It is in these spaces that children perceive and actualise the affordances of the outdoor environment for their play practices. Children see cues in the environment that indicate or suggest ways of behaving (Woolley, 2015), or, as suggested by others, each child perceives elements in the outdoor environment and how these match their own individual characteristics (Greeno, 1994; Kytta, 2004). As suggested in [Chapter 1](#) in relation to digital games, children may perceive *procedural* affordances for play: potential rule sets made possible by the structures of the landscape.

In contrast to these found spaces, which *are not* designed or built for children's play practices, are *constructed* spaces (Woolley, 2015) which *are* designed and built for children and young people's play practices. In the Opie Archive, the constructed spaces mentioned by child contributors include the anticipated public playgrounds, parks and school playgrounds. A variety of outdoor spaces within which a play space might exist or which might be expected to accommodate play are also mentioned. The now lesser-used term of recreation grounds, usually intended more for the community and not necessarily only for children, along with pitches and courts, presumably built for some sort of sporting activity, are also identified as play spaces. Gardens and backyards, which are both associated with houses but probably of different characters – gardens

likely to be greener and yards more likely to be dominated by hard paved surfaces – are also mentioned as places of play.

Many of these constructed spaces do not support the range of play types, such as fantasy and creative play and opportunities for fine motor development, that they might (Woolley and Lowe, 2013), and we believe that it is because of this that children's play practices so often use found spaces in outdoor environments, where these are physically and socially available. However, not only are found outdoor environments not always available but often, in some cultures and communities, the use of them is perceived by adults as transgressive, as we have seen in the above examples from the Opies and others. This can be constructed as a barrier to play, although the Opies make the important point that the transgressive nature of the play involved in contested spaces provides much of the pleasure for children.

Children's deepest pleasure, as we shall see, is to be away in the wastelands, yet they do not care to separate themselves altogether from the adult world. In some forms of play ... they seem deliberately to attract attention to themselves, smashing milk bottles, banging on doors, and getting in people's way.

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 11)

Children's play, then, while it was and continues to be found in the constructed spaces of playgrounds, parks and recreation grounds, prefers the array of affordances in found spaces. It is children's own reported experiences of these, recorded and embedded in the Opie Archive, which we will now go on to explore.

What the Opie Archive tells us about where children play

The questionnaires prepared by the Opies did not ask about where children played, but sometimes references to such spaces were included in the records of observations and in children's own writings, stories and drawings in response to the questionnaires. The Opies learned to make their questions open-ended, one tactic being to prompt for games played in certain spatial and temporal environments. This is evidenced in the second questionnaire referred to by Bannister, Bishop and Somerset-Ward in [Chapter 2](#) of this volume, which the Opies regarded as a supplement to the first questionnaire. In it they ask, for example, for

Names and description of:

1. Any game involving running across the street.
2. Any game or prank played after dark.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 14)

The child contributors provided, in their responses to these approaches, a rich understanding of where they played: it was not only in found spaces of streets and constructed spaces of playgrounds, but also beyond these in a variety of spaces with many different affordances: the secret spaces, wildernesses and forbidden territories noted by the Opies.

However, undisputedly more types of found, than constructed, spaces are mentioned in the children's writings and in some of the supporting illustrations they drew. Some of the spaces were close to home in domestic open spaces, while others were further away in neighbourhood spaces (Woolley, 2003) and include elements within the spaces, as well as the spaces themselves. Still others were located beyond neighbourhoods, in woods, wastelands and other natural spaces.

Affordances for play were actualised adjacent to houses, or for some types of housing, even as part of the home, including doorways, doorsteps, stairs, yards, passageways and gennels (more often termed 'ginnels' in the North West, 'gennels' being more typical in Yorkshire). Differences may have existed between house types, especially in the early years of the Opies' research when terraced housing was very common and resulted in spaces such as gennels, passageways and yards, and elements such as doorsteps being close by.

Many opportunities for play were found beyond the doorstep in linear spaces including footpaths, roads, streets, alleys, paths and kerbs, giving a small but important change of level as well as a boundary or baseline. Once again, these suggest specifically *procedural* affordances: rules in games making use of such quantifiable assets as level changes, lines and boundaries. Another linear environment named for play is the railway line, which may or may not have been adjacent to home, and which again suggests a procedural character, even a binary character analogous to coded games: the train is either coming or not coming, and the sublime appeal of danger hinges on this binary condition. Roofs, sheds, tents, dens, walls and fences all sound as if they are in the neighbourhood, so not as close to the home as the previously mentioned found spaces, but not that far away from home. Knowledge of the neighbourhood must surely have been developed when playing in 'The Backs' and 'Round the Back', so that geographic

knowledge, perhaps even cartographic knowledge, formed part of children's play repertoires.

The linear character of a road with pavements on both sides gives affordance for the game 'First to the Cemetery', with a name that suggests what might happen if a player does not succeed in the game; though, interestingly, it superimposes an imagined, liminal location over an actual one used in the game, suggesting the kind of layering or lamination in children's play repertoires described by Potter and Cowan in [Chapter 6](#) of this volume.

First to the cemetery

The people who are playing this game line up on one of the pavements of the road and wait until a car or motor lorry comes. When it gets rather close you all run across and the one who gets nearest to the front bumper wins.

(Boy, Sale County Grammar School for Boys, 1951–3,
Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 1 fol. 207r)

Here again, the condition for play and for the appeal of danger revolves around the procedural affordances of the environment: the presence or not of the vehicle. These spaces can also be seen as liminal spaces, bearing some relation to other such spaces discussed in relation to supernatural beliefs in [Chapter 4](#) of this volume.

Further from home, there appear to be three types of outdoor environments favoured for play: urban and town environments, green environments and water environments. The urban and town environments include waste ground and bomb sites, which must surely be from the years immediately after the Second World War. Additional urban and town environments were named as shops and 'in town', the latter being an urban environment studied with respect to children and young people by others, including the first author of this chapter at the start of her research career (e.g. Woolley et al., 1999; Spencer and Woolley, 2000). Green environments include woods, 'The Woods' (not just any old woods), fields, trees, shrubland, hedges, grass and sand. Play environments with water covered a wide range of types, some of which might be close to home but some of which surely were not and potentially required significant travel. These included the river, stream, pond, canal, reservoir and Marshes (Hackney).

Sometimes we go over the old bomb ruins what we call 'Caflic', and have a game of hind-in-seek [sic]. There are trees chopped

down, bushes growing everywhere and it is all mud except for some small patches of grass here and there. Other times we play 'hi-jimanaka-one-two-three'.

(Girl, 12, Camberwell, Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 103)

One girl's understanding of their neighbourhood and the affordance for play in one specific location is described below, and in the archive is supported by a map showing the wood, the route taken, the den and where the two friends are on the route (Figure 8.1).

As she explains:

After my tea I go and call for my friend and we go into a little wood near our house. The game I like playing most of all is tracking. Where one of us go [sic] into the trees and we leave little signs to show where we are going and the other girl has to try to find us. When it is my turn I make a path going one way and back track and she would follow that one and give me more time to find a good hiding places [sic].

(Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 18 fols 54r–54v)

The tracks, paths and signs used and made by the girls also suggest the 'playlines' discussed earlier in relation to Marsh and Bishop's account of playground games in the following chapter. Meanwhile, the procedural-ity of the affordances provided here is indicated by the options at the bottom, strongly reminiscent of the game options typically provided in modern computer games: 'HIDE HERE OR GO BACK TO DEN'.

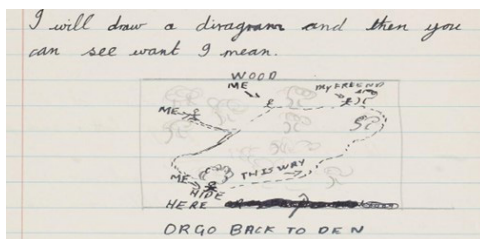


Figure 8.1 Drawing illustrating the game of 'Tracking', by girl (aged 10–11), Crickhowell Junior School, 1961. Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 18 fol. 54v. CC BY-NC 4.0.

The importance of elements within spaces: ledges, walls, lampposts

Not only were a wide range of spaces within outdoor environments mentioned, but so were specific elements within those spaces because of their importance as a focal point for gathering, as a reference point in the landscape or as an important factor in the play or game being explained. One example of this is the record of the role that walls and fences play in what appears to be an adult reminiscence:

... walls or fences of our front gardens provided well marked boundaries and the width of the road was admirable for most games. In front of my own home, for instance, was a low brick wall with a flat cement top upon which we could sit when awaiting our turn and home was reached when we touched the wall.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford)

Again, the procedural affordances for game rules suggested in [Chapter 1](#) are clearly in evidence here: boundaries, constraints, turn-taking, win/lose conditions. Another example reveals that walls and ledges do more than set boundaries, sometimes offering affordance for risk in play.

Ledge Tick and Tack

This game is played by at least three boys in which you go elect a person to chase you and then you run along the ledges and the person has to pull you off and sometimes it ends in a fight.

(Boy, 13, Powis Secondary School, Aberdeen, c. 1960–3,
Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 14 fol. 85r)

This kind of vertiginous thrill was termed ‘linox’ by Roger Caillois in his categorisation of games (Caillois, [1958/2001](#)), and forms a specifically spatial aspect of the wider category of risk in play. These kind of risky locations, alongside the morbid frisson of the cemetery location in the earlier example, indicate a liminal quality in play related to strange, dangerous or forbidden elements in the topographies of play. For a discussion of this as ‘heterotopian play’, drawing on Foucault ([1984](#)), see Burn, [2014](#): 20–4. Once again, the Opies were alert to these kinds of risky, transgressive play, describing the wastelands, bomb sites,

nighttime play, and ‘the secret places “where no-one else goes”’(1969: 15). Opie takes this a step further in her Preface to the 1984 edition of *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*:

As well as continuing to play ‘Last Across’ in front of trains and across busy streets, children now ride up and down on top of lifts in tower blocks, and hurl rolls of metal foil at high-voltage electricity cables, holding the end of the foil as long as they dare before the two make contact in a lethal flurry of sparks. Pretending games ... now often enact episodes from galactic sagas such as ‘Star Wars’, and world news, as seen on television, continues to inspire its quota of games.

(Opie, 2013: 21)

Walls played an important part of play and games in school playgrounds as well as in streets at the time of the Opies’ research. One game in particular is recorded as being played in both locations:

Wall to Wall

One player stands mid-way between the two walls and the rest (‘there need to be more than twenty children for a decent game’) line up at one wall and have to run across to the other, keeping within the boundaries. Anyone touched while running from one wall to the other joins the catcher in the middle, as in other games so that the balance gradually changes in the favour of the catchers, and the last two or three players are hard put to it to get from one wall to the other without being caught.

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 175)

One evocative drawing in the archive (Figure 8.2) shows the use of a wall for a game called ‘Ally Bally’ in Aberdeen and ‘Queenie’ in other locations such as Scarborough, Lincoln, Ruthin and Penrith, although, unlike the drawing, not all the written accounts require the existence of a wall.

As can be seen in the drawing representing Ally Bally, one girl has the ball and stands with her back to the wall, while another record of the version of the game is summarised by the Opies thus:

Queenie

She stands with her back turned to the rest. Without looking behind her, she throws the ball back over her head, and the other girls

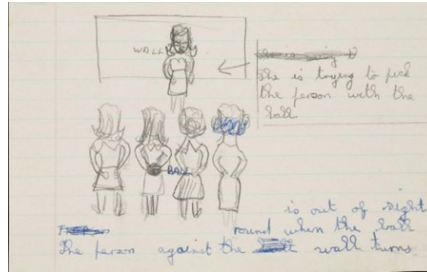


Figure 8.2 Drawing of ‘Ally Bally’, by girl (aged 14), Powis Secondary School, Aberdeen, 1960. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 14 fol. 50r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

scramble for it. They then form up in a row, with their hands behind their backs so that the girl in front will not know which of them has the ball: and they let Queenie know they are ready... Queenie then turns round, and picks the player she thinks is concealing the ball. If her guess is correct she usually remains Queenie: if she is wrong, the girl who had been successful in concealing the ball takes her place.

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 290–1)

The importance of lampposts is emphasised by some children in their text but also in an illustration for the game ‘Walk the Plank or Join the Crew’ (Figure 8.3). This shows a detailed understanding of the elements for the game and includes details of the design of the lampposts: the location on the road, the boundary of the pavement and the road and where the ‘men’ are – one on the road and five on the pavement. Once again, an imaginary space – a pirate ship – is superimposed on an actual space – in much the same way as children observed in our projects superimpose the landscapes of videogames over the tarmac of playgrounds (see Chapter 1). And once again, the imagined space refers to a liminal place of thrilling risk.

One player, the first man in the drawing, goes into the middle of the road and the others stand on the edge of the pavement. The first man calls another player’s name and asks, ‘Walk the plank or join the crew?’ If the one asked chooses to, they quietly join the first man in the middle of the road and another player is asked the question. If a player chooses not to join the crew but replies ‘Walk the plank’, they try to reach the other side of the road without being caught:

If he succeeds he shouts ‘Schoolie’, or ‘Overboard’, and all the others rush over in a body. But if he is caught the one in the middle

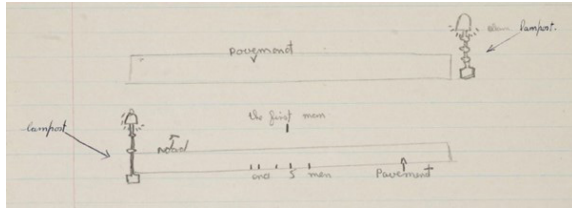


Figure 8.3 ‘Walk the Plank or Join the Crew’, by girl (aged 14), Aberdeen, 1960. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 14 fol. 68r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

‘tortures him’ until he agrees to join the crew. There are then two in the middle, and the game continues until everybody has, in one manner or another, been persuaded to join the crew.

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 142)

Interestingly, one girl reported about this game that ‘If they catch you before you reach the other side of the road, they pull off your socks and shoes and tickle your feet and twist your ears, and pull your hair, until you join the crew’ (Girl (aged 12) in Aberdeen, Opie and Opie, 1969: 142).

So these elements, including ledges, walls, lampposts and many others, within the urban landscape provided many, possibly endless, opportunities for children to actualise the affordances they perceived in these environments, and to realise different modalities and dimensions of play, including the risky, vertiginous, liminal aspects suggested by some of these environments, and the procedural affordances they imply.

Time of play

There is evidence also that some of these elements supported games and play at different times of the day, and lampposts in particular seem to support such affordances being realised. The quotation from the girl at Crickhowell Junior School above reveals that the children went to play in the wood after tea. Other reports reveal that some games were played later on – in the dark, as stated in one response to a question about a favourite game:

My favourite game

My friends and I play a game which is rather like hide and seek, only we play it when it is dark. We play this game in the vast field at the back of our houses. There are many hiding places in people’s gardens,

sheds, in the bushes and up the canal. This game is played only when it is dark and during the day we play ordinary hide and seek.

(Girl, 11, Dalneigh Primary School, Inverness, 1962,
Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 20 fol. 54r)

Another girl also details the location, the importance of one specific element within the street – the lamp – and both the time of year and day: a summer night:

I do not remember the song [Wallflowers] so much as I do the setting, for on [a] Summer night all the young children would wait at the bottom of our street under the lamp until our two friends came. They were twin girls and they taught us many games and as soon as the lamp came on we all went home to bed and the street was silent again, until [sic] at least the next night.

(Girl, 14, Portway Secondary Modern Girls' School,
Bristol, 1960, Archive of Iona and Peter Opie,
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,
MS. Opie 17 fol. 190r)

As with secret or risky locations, or play based on the kinds of half-belief legends documented by Bannister et al. in [Chapter 4](#), the thrill of play in the dark contributes to the notion of liminal forms of play.

Just the street and some playthings

Embedded within the archive is a richness of actualised affordances of play in the many different types of found spaces reported by children up and down the country, using elements within the spaces and at different times of the day and year. Although many different types of found spaces are mentioned in both the archive and the Opies' books, many report using just the street, with some performing a 'mischievous deed':

Ginger Knocking

You can have a few boys with you but it is best to have one or two. You go round people's front doors and then you knock at them and run away.

(Boy, 12, Eastholm Secondary School, Peterborough, c.1953,
Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 9 fol. 566r)

Another young writer explains an unnamed game, but acknowledges it as a mischievous deed: ‘we creep very quietly to their gate then to the door where our mischievous deed is about to occur. Then one of us rings the bell or knocks at the door and when we run for our lives’ (Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 11 fol. 241r).

The Opies make a number of critical distinctions between the motivations and cultures of games played in different kinds of environments. They argue, for example, that games played in confined spaces such as playgrounds are more likely to exhibit cruelty and bullying than those played in the more open spaces of ‘the wasteland’. In relation specifically to mischief-making such as that exhibited in the examples above, they note that it depends on the transgressive incursion into adult spaces, so that a tension exists between children’s desire for the untrammelled spaces of the wastelands, and the desire to remain within adult spaces in neighbourhoods, where the pleasure of play is in tormenting.

Elsewhere, children report games with playthings (Bishop and Curtis, 2001). Perhaps one of the shortest references to games with playthings is as follows: ‘Any time I feel like a game I get a ball and go outside and call for some of my pals’ (Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 19 fol. 235r). This is a clear expression of this child’s advocacy for their right to play, apparently with no parental control. The ball is the thing taken to encourage others to join in the game – possibly just into the street where they live. It is a microcosm of the enormous cultural landscape of ball-play, its appeal, its social uses, its locations. The Opies, for example, memorably devote an entire chapter to ‘Ball-Bouncing’ in their book *Children’s Games with Things* (Opie and Opie, 1997), drawing on the material collected in the surveys of the 1950s and 1960s. They note:

The girls speak of ball-bouncing with devotion. It is ‘the favourite of the popular games’, ‘the mostest game I play’. ‘At this time of year [May] nearly every girl brings two balls to school with her. You can’t walk beside a wall without getting in the way of people bouncing their balls.’ ‘We’re not allowed balls at school. We play for hours and hours at home though.’ ‘Is it any fun on your own?’ we asked. ‘Oh yes, I play every night.’

(Opie and Opie, 1997: 128)

One 12-year-old girl states that ‘games I don’t like are games where you stand still’. The Opies noted, in the Introduction to *Children’s Games*

in *Street and Playground*, a number of ways in which games relate to movement. Skipping games are an obvious example: 'At school we have a number of games and I'm going to tell you about some of them. We play skipping by two people hold the rope and swing it up and down while one jumps in and skips' (Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford). Others involve less structured movement requiring wider spaces, such as chasing games. Still others relate to constraints on movement, where the constraint forms the pleasure or challenge, such as games in trees or on top of walls. A very particular kind of movement involving freedom to roam but also requiring skill is represented by the importance of bicycles and what you can do with them, highlighted in these two examples:

A favourite hobby

A favourite hobby of mine is rough riding on my push bike. We make a track through the wood or mud there is a great possibility of having blow up.

(Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford)

Cycle tracking

Our track is situated at the far end off Alma Road near some factories, we use the track when the factories are closed. The track consists of two corners and two straights both of the straights are about 20–25 feet in length. We go round the track 4 times for one heat and their [sic] are 4 or 5 heats in one set.

(Archive of Peter and Iona Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford)

The Opies noted that bicycles can be deployed in games of 'nerve and skill', such as 'Danger Ride', in which two boys charge each other on bikes over a patch of wasteland (Opie and Opie, 1969: 284). In our example of Cycle tracking, the uses of the environment suggest what Caillois terms 'agonistic' games (1958/2001); but also the social context of urban play, away from bespoke parks and playgrounds, appropriating the industrial landscapes of post-war Britain.

Conclusion: actualised affordances of play

So we have seen that, despite the fact that Iona and Peter Opie did not specifically ask where children played in their questionnaires, the responses to their questions, evidenced from both the archive and their books, sometimes prompted by the framing of some of the Opies' questions, revealed that children played in many different types of spaces and that *found* spaces in particular were very much used. The wide variety of different types of found spaces is important to note because of the affordances of play they provided, and the topographic knowledge absorbed into the children's repertoires of play. This knowledge of the neighbourhood is, we know from more recent research, missing for many children in cities today (e.g. Gaster, 1991; Tandy, 1999; Karsten, 2005; Skår and Krogh, 2009; Kinoshita, 2009; Woolley and Griffin, 2014).

Our conclusion is that it was a common, everyday experience for children to play in many different outdoor places, especially in the earlier decades of the Opies' research (see the chapter on Space and Play in Marsh and Bishop, 2014, for an extended discussion of this). As we have seen, the Opies documented in detail the different spaces and elements of the outdoor environment where children played, as well as providing some suggestive categories distinguishing the particular uses of such spaces. Here, play is not in the service of what Brian Sutton-Smith called the 'progression rhetoric' – play as a neat, controlled preparation for adulthood and education – but situated firmly in what he termed phantasmagoria (Sutton-Smith, 1997). As the Opies put it: 'As long as the game is of a child's own making he is ready, even anxious, to sample the perils of which this world has such plentiful supply... he – or she – is even prepared to meet the "things that happen in the dark"' (Opie and Opie, 1969: 6). The Opies, as we have seen, take darker aspects of play in their stride, confident of their value in the general landscape of childhood.

In general, then, while other chapters of this book attend to the detail and context of play in school playgrounds, we have seen here how the affordances of found spaces provide quite different opportunities and attractions for play. The evidence from the voices of the children in the archive indicates how determined they are in the appropriation not only of extended domestic spaces such as the front doorstep or backyard, not only even of adult spaces such as roads and railway lines, but of the rough territory of the wasteland which the Opies so vividly depicted.

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Meshwork, playlines and palimpsests: a tracing of play over time

Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop

Play as wayfaring

This chapter traces histories of play as they were instantiated across one primary school playground over a seven-year period. The playground in question, that of Montenev Primary School, was the subject of investigation in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project, *Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age*, which took place between 2009 and 2011. The same research team has recently revisited the playground as part of the subsequent Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)-funded project at the centre of this book, *Playing the Archive*. This has offered an opportunity to consider the way in which collective memories are instantiated in physical space through play, play that is inflected by the virtual spaces of media in a digitised world.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws from Lefebvre, who posited that 'mental and social activity impose their own meshwork upon nature's space' (1991: 117). Lefebvre suggested the adoption of a notion of 'archi-texture' rather than architecture, which means that when we consider the built environment, we think about time and space, not simply the materiality of the space. Tim Ingold further developed Lefebvre's concept of meshwork to suggest that it referred to 'organisms being constituted within a relational field' (Ingold, 2010: 71), a field not with connected points (i.e. a network), but with interwoven lines. These are lines of movement, which Ingold characterises as resulting from wayfaring on 'trails along which life is lived' (Ingold, 2007: 81). This wayfaring, Ingold argues, leads to the storying of knowledge, and he suggests that 'the paths of wayfaring, as they thread their way through

the inhabited world rather than routing across it from point to point, comprise a meshwork. Storied knowledge, then, is neither classificatory nor networked. It is meshworked' (Ingold, 2011: 163).

There have been other attempts to capture this notion of emplaced knowledge (Christensen, 2003) in play spaces that are studied over time. Seath (2018: 145–56) argues that 'there is the hint of songlines in the heritage of play', drawing from a significant aspect of Aboriginal Dreamtime. We suggest that, while the concept of songlines is of interest because of its signification of the interrelationship between place and memory, it is not appropriate to use it in this context, given its origin in Aboriginal people's culture, which overlays place and memory with a holistic belief system. As the Aboriginal scholars Perry and Holt (2018: 346) note, songlines 'provide a complex Aboriginal knowledge system to educate our people of their country and entire world, beginning with their land and a belief system, sustaining not only their physical world but more importantly their spiritual realm'. Nevertheless, while songlines may not be an appropriate concept to deploy here, the notion of histories being traced through the landscape, and collective memories becoming 'spatially "engraved" or "implaced" on the local environment' (Allen and Brown, 2016: 14), is one of interest. Factor (2014) proposes the concept of 'play-lines' to describe the emplacement of memories on physical playground spaces, which is a more apt term to use. She describes them thus:

The physical features of a primary school playground – dimensions, textures, furnishings, etc. – are incorporated and adapted for their own purposes by children in their free play. Youngsters create an intricate network of usage, play-lines invisible but known to every child at the school.

(Factor, 2014: 142)

This concept can be linked to Ingold's notion of wayfaring, in its emphasis on movement and on lines traced repeatedly over time. Hackett (2016) has considered wayfaring in relation to young children's visits to a museum, drawing from Massey's (2005: 140) understanding of space/time/memory as 'a history and geography of thens and theres' to illustrate how the children's repeated visits shape their use over time.

The processes embedded in the construction of playlines and meshworked storied knowledge lead us to consider a third key concept that is of value in the analysis developed in this paper: the notion of the playground as palimpsest (Seath, 2018). The word 'palimpsest' originated in relation to medieval manuscripts. Parts of manuscripts

were erased and then inscribed with subsequent text, but there were always traces of the original text, and over time this led to a richly layered text in which the past could be discerned in the present. Drawing from Derrida's (1978) notion of *différance* (the notion that the meaning of an utterance or text is understood in relation to other absent, deferred meanings, what is not said), we argue that as we speak today's play into existence, this is only by acknowledging the absences, what is not present – which is the play of the past. Dillon suggests that:

The palimpsest visibly represents what Derrida describes as the 'non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present'. The 'present' of the palimpsest is only constituted in and by the 'presence' of texts from the 'past', as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the 'future'. The presence of texts from the past, present (and possibly the future) in the palimpsest does not elide temporality, but evidences the spectrality of any 'present' moment which always already contains within it 'past', 'present' and 'future' moments.

(Dillon, 2005: 249)

Thus, in a consideration of the meshworked storied knowledge that is embedded in playlines, we can see the playground as a palimpsest in which traces of past play are layered on the present, and embed future possibilities.

A further lens on this work can be derived from theories of new materialism, in which post-humanist philosophy informs an understanding of the dynamic between humans and their environments. One key proponent of this is Karen Barad, who suggests that:

The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated.

(Barad, 2007: 152)

They refer to phenomena as '*ontological entanglements*' (Barad, 2007: 333; original emphasis), in which humans and objects intra-act. In order to apply these various reflected lenses, we consider each of the concepts

above in the light of data from the project. We begin with playlines, as they constitute the groundwork for embodied knowledge.

Playlines

Playlines often begin with walking from one place to another within the playground, a practice Ingold (2007) characterises as ‘wayfaring’. Walking, as Kelton et al. (2018: 546) suggest, ‘is not simply the functional movement between locations; it is a practice of meaning- and place-making ... Repeated walks produce “thick lines” (Lee and Ingold, 2006: 77) that call on past experiences’. At Montenevy, children walked around the playground wearing a GoPro camera, which enabled them to capture their playlines directly (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of ethical issues relating to the use of GoPro cameras as a method of data collection). For example, Terry in Year 2 walked around a space in which she recalled playing hide-and-seek behind a bin, pointed out a place on the ground which had got flooded in the rain and caused a child to slip, and drew attention to a hole in the ground which she felt was shaped like a heart, and she identified that she and her friends danced in it, then demonstrated the dancing. These ‘thick lines’ (Lee and Ingold, 2006: 77) are significant for children and serve to create memories of play over time. In numerous instances, children in the study recalled their play of a few years previously, inevitably linked to specific places. Sarah Pink (2015) offers an account of place as sensory entanglement, and at Montenevy children recalled sounds as well as sights in their memories of play.

One of the key aspects of playlines, as outlined by Factor (2014), is that continuities of uses in relation to space remain constant over time. It is the case, inevitably, that the affordances of the spaces themselves sometimes shape their use, such as large, open spaces that lend themselves to football, or grassy slopes that invite rolling down. Sometimes children learned about these games by watching others, but in other cases there were more formal introductions. For example, there was an area of the playground that saw the game ‘Colour Tig’ played, which involved children running to poles painted in different colours. Children described being introduced to this on playground tours:¹

Julia: How did you know that that game was played there?

Amy: It’s basically ... I mean I used to remember, because when you’re in Year 2 what they do is, they do some yard transitions to get you ready for like the big yard. And once

they gave you a tour they mentioned it on the tour what we had. I don't know if they still do it now, but ...

Layla: Yeah they do, I remember that.

In the intra-actions (Barad, 2007) between children and these environments, there would be some persistent features of such practices over time, given the specific features of the objects or spaces, but each ontological entanglement would constitute a unique and specific instance. What is passed on, in that case, is not a specific practice but a means of intra-acting that is shaped by specific conditions. Of course, not all play practices *are* passed on. Wayfaring can lead to singular, idiosyncratic uses of space that are not passed on between children, and so the playlines constitute individual, not collective, histories of emplaced play. Children were frequently very specific about the places in which they played:

Jake: Yeah, but I don't really dig there. It's next to the slope there's like some mud, and then if you go past that little tree what's broken and now people use as an obstacle course, there's like a little small hole like that big ...

Julia: Mmm, cupping both of your hands.

Jake: Yeah. And then I dig in there and find a lot of special locks.
(MPJB2019-05-03a002)

It should be noted, however, that wayfaring need not be a singular practice. Amy described how she and her friends found a specific place for their game:

Amy: Well you know on the banking where all the grass is and the climbing frame is?

Julia: Yeah.

Amy: There are two trees that are far away from each other, the one that's got all leaves on and the one that hasn't got leaves on. What me and my friends do is, we pretend that our arms are wings and we pretend that we are birds and we keep on knocking our fists into trees.

Julia: What do you do with your fists?

Amy: We keep on knocking our fists into the trees like we're weird birds and we don't know where we're going.

(MPJB2019-05-03a002)

In addition to playing together, walking is also important. Children frequently wander the playground in tandem with others and, as Kelton

et al. (2018: 547) suggest, ‘Walking together is a kind of socio-material place-making and development of shared meaning, even as individuals independently create place and meaning.’ Inevitably, these collaborative playlines become imbued with stories over time, which can be characterised, drawing from Ingold’s (2011) work, as ‘meshworked storied knowledge’.

Meshworked storied knowledge

Ingold suggests that ‘to lead a life is to lay down a line’ (2015: 118). Children lay down lines all the time in the playground, as the example of Terry in the previous section indicates, and these lines constitute a rich meshwork which led to storied knowledge. In every nook and cranny of the playground can be found a story, an emplacement of knowledge. Stories get passed on from group to group, and can change over time. An example from the Monteney study of this meshworked storied knowledge could be discerned from a group walk around the playground. The children on the walk point out a memorial to a child from the school who died. The story of her death has obviously become embellished over the years. The children discussed this as they stood in front of a memorial tree:

Ben: It’s in memory of a child who was at Monteney. They were very poorly and they died when they were young.

Louis: It’s in memory of a child. In loving memory of [Child’s name], 1988–1997.

Megan: My sister says she knows how she died.

Louis: I do.

Megan: She was in the girls’ toilets and she died, apparently.

Louis: She weren’t. She went down on a snowy day, like that, and she did a cartwheel down that big hill ...

Megan: ... And she died.

Louis: ... and she cartwheeled and she landed on her head and her head come off her body.

Megan: Yikes.

Louis: It were really scary.

(MPGP2018-05-01v033)

Ghost stories occur in relation to particular school spaces such as toilets (as the fieldwork in [Chapter 4](#) of this volume shows), and in terms of genre it would appear that ghost and horror stories of this kind are a

common example of meshworked storied knowledge. There are other kinds of stories that were encountered at Montenev, however, related to accidents children had had in specific spaces, or exchanges with adults that had been imbued on memories.

In the next section, we move on to consider how the processes involved in this complex entanglement of memory, space, objects and bodies over time can be best encapsulated by considering the playground as a palimpsest.

Palimpsest

The processes involved in playlines, wayfaring and the creation of meshworks mean that the playground may be considered as a palimpsest, in which traces of play past can be discerned in the present, and play futures might be glimpsed (Seath, 2018). One example of this might be those special places in playgrounds which retain an iconic status over time, but where practices might get rewritten. In the Montenev playground, this occurred in relation to a large tree to the rear of the school. In the 2009–11 study, this tree became the central artefact in imaginative play focused on the film *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), popular at that time. Four boys donned the personas of American servicemen who tried, and failed, to chop the tree down. In 2018, girls were filmed under the same tree, creating fairy gardens using grass and flowers. The tree offered an atmosphere in which fairy gardens could flourish, just as all those years ago it had reminded the children of the ecological importance of trees to one (fictional) community.

It is not just objects that evoke the notion of a palimpsest, but practices also. It was evident in the study that a practice that has persisted over time is that of children bringing cultural knowledge derived from YouTube into their play. In 2009–11, there were numerous instances of children playing games informed by their YouTube viewing (such as particular television programmes, or pop songs). The ability to replay videos was obviously conducive to them learning dance sequences, for example. One group of boys described how they had learned all the moves of Diversity, a dance group that won the television show *Britain's Got Talent*. In 2018, this had transformed into a wide interest in dances related to the computer game *Fortnite*. Children could be observed breaking into the dance moves, deploying what Taylor (2014) describes as 'postural intertextuality', which occurs when specific gestures and moves from texts are copied. Similarly, in 2009–11, children described

how they played games in the playground based on their YouTube viewing, such as machinima (films made from edited video captures of videogames) made of their favourite online games and virtual worlds, such as *Club Penguin* (RocketSnail Games/Disney). In 2018, this could be discerned in children's play based on challenges, such as the 'Floor is Lava' challenge. Rita, for example, described how she and her friends played 'Floor is Lava', where they had to get off the ground quickly when anyone shouted the phrase out. She described how she had watched this challenge on YouTube:

Rita: Yeah, and they got like really told off by someone in the shop for getting on the shelf, and it was not good at all.

Julia: Was that on YouTube?

Rita: Yeah.

Julia: How did you find that, did you just ... ?

Rita: Just type up 'Floor Is Lava challenge'.

(MPJB2018-05-24a001)

In a review of the changing nature of play over the past 60 years, we suggested that what can be seen in contemporary play is a process of 'intensified bricolage', which:

... points to the way in which *some* play texts, in *some* contexts, are now more laminated, that is multi-layered, due to the complexities of the textual landscapes of contemporary childhood. Localized practices are now conflated with the global in ways that were not possible in previous generations because of the way in which digital technologies accelerate and extend the 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995) process.

(Marsh and Bishop, 2014: 156)

This was as true in 2009–11 as it is now, although on the 2018 Montenev playground the textual referents had shifted somewhat, away from, for example, virtual worlds to YouTube favourites, which is inevitable as children's tastes change in relation to content. In that sense, we might glimpse a future in which children continue to draw from media referents, including YouTube, but the specific texts and practices will be quite different, perhaps drawing more from new areas of development, such as AI and VR. What these examples indicate is that the playground as palimpsest is a useful metaphor, given the way in which it acknowledges persistent traces over time.

Conclusion: tracing the lines of flight

In considering the continuities and discontinuities in play between the short period separating the first and second studies reported in this paper, it is striking that much is the same, and much is different. In a nine-year period, much of the media content of children's lives has changed, with social media playing a greater role in young children's lifeworlds (Marsh et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, while the cultural repository has changed, the way in which play is shaped across space and time remains the same, meaning that the meshwork of play is intact. The lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) discerned in this play may be new and unexpected, but those lines can be persistently tracked by ethnographers of children's play. This endeavour requires us to find new ways of tracing these lines, and mapping their wayfaring. In this project, GoPro chest cameras were used as a means of capturing embodied understandings of play, and the use of a drone camera helped the children to visualise their play in a 3D environment. These technologies will be helpful for now, but as relevant new software and hardware develops, it should be tested in the playgrounds of schools and communities in order to attempt to capture play with greater granularity. It will also be important to continue to try to find ways to engage children themselves in the tracing of their playlines over time and space, so that the archives of play created by research remain dynamically linked to the repertoires of play created by children, in the circuit described by Andrew Burn in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. In this way, both researchers and children may reach a greater understanding of play and its environments, enhancing agency and reaffirming identities in a context in which children's play continues to be marginalised in the policy arena.

Note

- 1 Playground tours were undertaken by members of the school council who participated as researchers on the project (see [Chapter 10](#) for a fuller explanation). These school researchers wore GoPro cameras and, working in groups of four from the same year group, they recorded a video 'tour' of their school's play spaces, commenting as they went along, and often playing in the spaces as well.

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Crossing the generational divide in play: individual and collective memories in conversation

Julia Bishop

Perceptions of play

The historical and the contemporary ethnographic dimensions of the Playing the Archive project offered an exciting opportunity to explore continuity and change in children's play over a period of nearly 60 years, from the mid-twentieth century to the late 2010s, a period spanning considerable social and technological change. These changes have affected childhoods generally in multiple ways, including children's play lives (see Marsh and Bishop, 2014, for a more detailed account of this in the UK context). A corollary of this is that each generation's experience of childhood play may be felt to be very distinct from that of other, especially later, generations, a perception which, as Iona and Peter Opie themselves noted, has a long history (1997: 8–14).

Numerous studies have highlighted adults' recurrent concern with the lack, nature or quality of play of younger generations, sometimes fuelled by media moral panics, and the advent of new media technologies designed for – or lending themselves to – play, leisure and entertainment has added to the sense of a generational divide in play culture (e.g. Buckingham, 2000; Bishop and Curtis, 2001; Blatchford, 2005). In our own time, for example, children's physical play is often perceived as in decline, while their digital play is subjected to a reductionist characterisation as 'screentime', demonised as sedentary and addictive, and heavily regulated (e.g. Livingstone, 2021). Yet, research repeatedly shows that there is considerable creative cross-fertilisation from digital to physical play (e.g. Giddings, 2014; Burn and Richards, 2014).

Parallel attitudes were regularly encountered by the Opies themselves, who were told that 'children no longer cherished their

traditional lore' and 'had lost the power of entertaining themselves; that first the cinema, and now T.V. had become the focus of their attention', and that, therefore, 'we had started our investigation fifty years too late' (Opie and Opie, 1959: v). They highlight that 'Adults can be savagely critical of the supposed sophistication or inertia of contemporary school-children; and equally self-righteous about their own childhoods. The much-reiterated phrase is, "We used to make our *own* amusements"' (Opie and Opie, 1997: 13).

Given the ongoing censure of children's digital play, it is somewhat ironic that the kind of play practices of children in the third quarter of the twentieth century that the Opies' books document have come to be seen by adults today as a touchstone by which the play and games of contemporary children are judged – and often found wanting (as, for example, discussed in Bishop and Curtis, 2001, and Burn, 2014: 9–10, and often evidenced in popular journalism).

A central aim of the Playing the Archive project, therefore, was to address the generational divide in play culture. This chapter describes some of the ways in which practices, spaces and experiences of play in the individual and collective memory of adults and children today, and as documented in the children's contributions to the Opie Archive from the 1950s and '60s, were brought into conversation with each other. Children have few opportunities to learn about the histories of sport, games, customary practices and leisure activities that lie behind their play, both online and offline, or to hear about the play of those other than their immediate peers and friendship group. Conversely, adults may not be aware of commonalities between their experiences and those behind children's play practices today. As will be seen, the recognition of both continuity and change, of stability and innovation, in play between different generations emerged as an important strand in the research. This fostered conceptualisations of others' play forms and play experiences, including those of different generations, and introduced a focus on similarities and differences rather than 'better' or 'worse'/'absent'. Another significant finding, highlighted by the child researchers themselves, was the importance of children's own memories of play within the school's age-stratified structure and spatial configuration. As discussed in the conclusion, this resonates with Hanson's (2017) plea for attention to what he terms the 'been' child, who complements and extends the new sociology of childhood's earlier emphasis on the 'being' as well as the 'becoming'.

Generational divides in the Opie Archive contributions

As described in more detail in [Chapter 2](#), we were privileged to have digital access to the complete set of children's responses to the Opies' surveys in the 1950s and '60s investigating the folklore, language, games and play of school-aged children. Their decision to make children themselves their primary informants, a groundbreaking move at the time, was prompted by their observations that frequently adults did not fully or accurately remember their childhood rhymes and tended to forget the mundane detail of their childhood lives, about which they were also inclined to be nostalgic (Bishop, [2014b](#)). Nevertheless, the Opies still encouraged adult contribution too, especially from the teachers who helped operationalise their national survey, and who, in the first of the Opies' questionnaires, were invited to comment on or annotate individual examples with remarks such as 'very popular here' or 'I remember this in my youth, c.1910' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 46 fol. 2v).

While it is often imagined that the Opies' child respondents were all primary school children, the age range of their contributors was in fact around 6–14 (Opie and Opie, [1959](#): v). Indeed, looking at the list of the main contributing schools to their first two books, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* ([1959](#)) and *Children's Games in Street and Playground* ([1969](#)), we find a combined total of 138 different schools, of which 67 are secondary schools, and there are even some quotations in the books from 15-year-olds and the occasional 16-year-old.

The contribution of these older respondents to the Opies' work is now more apparent due to our ability to access their individual submissions to the Opies' surveys. While many of them phrase their contributions in such a way as to imply they were still actively playing the games they describe, there are others who distance themselves from them. Two sets of responses, sent in eight years apart, by pupils at Powis Junior Secondary School in Aberdeen, regularly refer to the theme of their age and the games they are – or are not – playing. One girl, for example, writing in 1952, explains, 'Now that I am fourteen and have stopped playing balls, ropes and beddies [hopscotch], I play netball for the school and often tennis when it is fine, but netball takes up most of my time' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 4 fol. 344v). Another, writing in 1960, links this to her transition from school to work, the school leaving age at this time being 15: 'My days for playing games are nearly over as I start work on the 12th July so I am afraid I will have to tell of the games I liked to

play' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 14 fol. 21r). At the same time, another Aberdeen response from the 1952 set lays claim to playing games as part of her leisure activities:

Now that I am nearly fourteen I haven't been playing so many games as I did when younger. But there are still so many games we still play and enjoy every minute of them and they do pass the time away on rainy evenings and others in summer evening[s] in the back yard. The first game I am to describe is called 'Film Stars'.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 4 fol. 359r)

These evidence the way in which young people themselves drew on conceptions of 'age-appropriate' play practices as a marker of generational identity in the mid-twentieth century. They reveal a range of attitudes as found within just one location and across a period of several years. The fact that so many responses from this school explicitly touch on this subject suggests that it is resonating with existing discourses around school leaving and 'growing up', perhaps as taught at the school by adults. In several of these examples, organised sport is presented as a more appropriate form of play for older children about to leave school, its generally agreed roles and rules perhaps being more in keeping with workplace culture.

Similar conceptions certainly crop up in the Opies' correspondence with adults too. For example, in a letter of 31 May 1960, written by Leslie Gilbert, a school inspector, accompanying a batch of contributions from 11- to 15-year-olds at Portway Secondary Modern Girls' School in Bristol, Gilbert admits:

I am quite disappointed with the output this time. I had thought that the girls would be dissatisfied with the games played by their younger brothers and sisters, and that their dissatisfaction might be reflected in increased complication in the games. Instead, these ageing ladies seem merely to cease to play the games at all; they are probably content with the rounders, netball, basketball, hockey, swimming and athletic events which form the basis of their physical activities at school. Nevertheless, I think that you will find occasional points of interest.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 17 fol. 136r)

The Opies' response is interesting for the way in which they reframe the situation, putting the point that the play of older children may be of a different kind than that which the girls have been asked about, and that the girls' recollections of younger children's games are still a valid and informative contribution to their research:

At first glance we were, like you, a trifle disappointed that the older girls should not have produced some more sophisticated games. A lot depends on what questions are asked, on who is asking them, and how they are asked. If, for instance, a teacher who had their confidence asked the older girls for the gambling games they knew, or the kissing games they knew, or the games they like best at teenage parties, the papers from the same girls might have been very different indeed.

Evidently, they were asked about the games they used to play, when younger, and it turned out that the question was by no means an unhappy one. Being older, the girls have filled in a remarkable number of details about young children's games which young children themselves tend to miss out. And during the past 24 hours we have had a wonderfully useful time extracting a phrase here, a term there, and a number of complete descriptions.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 17 fol. 137r)

A subsequent letter, dated 17 June 1960, from the headmistress of Portway School, indicates that the staff followed up on the Opies' suggestion, at least to some extent:

We have not made extensive inquiries about gambling and teenage parties, but some of the senior form mistresses have been having confidential chats with their girls. I have not come across any evidence that they play betting or gambling games. As far as parties are concerned, I gather that that custom is quite out with teen-agers. You do not play games, you sit around and listen to records.

(Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford, MS. Opie 17 fol. 140r)

These examples illustrate the differing ways in which the generational divide in play culture manifested itself in the Opies' research in mid-twentieth-century Britain and how they themselves responded to it in their work.

Crossing the generational divide in Playing the Archive

As with the Opies, research involving contemporary schoolchildren was a vital element in Playing the Archive. This was undertaken primarily at four schools, two in Sheffield in the north of England and two in London (see [Chapter 5](#) for further discussion of methods, especially in relation to the London schools). Although we were unable to match the geographical breadth of the Opies' survey, the research also extended to brief periods of research with children in Cardiff, Wales, and Aberdeen, Scotland, who took part in making audio recordings of historical contributions to the archive for inclusion in the *Time Telephone* (see [Chapter 7](#)) and shared current play practices. This chapter will focus on the research in Sheffield, as this was undertaken by the author and project co-investigator Jackie Marsh.

The Sheffield research took place at Montenev Primary School and Ecclesfield School, which lie some five and six miles north of Sheffield city centre, respectively. At the time of the fieldwork in April–July 2018, Montenev had some 467 pupils on roll, many drawn from a local housing estate comprising a mixture of public and privately owned ex-public housing housing, and the majority of whom were white British ([Gov.uk, 2018](#)). Ecclesfield School is a secondary school with approximately 1,700 pupils on roll, considerably higher than the national average; again, the Ecclesfield students are mainly from a white British background (Ofsted, 2017).

These two schools were selected for a number of reasons. Jackie Marsh and the author had done research at Montenev on several previous occasions, including as part of the Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age project in 2009–11. The ethnographic data from the earlier project gave us the opportunity to compare play at the school nine years apart. We discuss the layering of play in time over some of the same playground spaces at the school in more depth in [Chapter 9](#).

Ecclesfield School was formerly Ecclesfield Grammar School, where, in 1954, 21 pupils took part in the Opies' survey. Their responses are preserved in the Opie Archive (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 10 fols 543–75), where it can be seen that a number were written by students who lived in Parson Cross, where Montenev is now located.

This chapter will provide an overview of the research at each school in turn, providing a more in-depth consideration of a selection of the activities, and the light they shed on children's own generational

practices and memories of play, the possibilities for stimulating cross-generational exchange regarding play experiences, and children's and adults' perceptions of differences and similarities in play forms and texts.

Monteney Primary School, April–July 2018

Research at Monteney was undertaken in the summer term of 2018, with the author visiting roughly twice a week. The children selected by the school to be researchers on the project were the current members of the school council. There were two representatives from each class, one boy and one girl, across year groups 1–6, resulting in 24 participants, ranging in age from 5 to 11 years. All students and their parents/carers gave informed consent to be involved, and for the use of images in which they are identifiable, but their names have been pseudonymised.

The information sheet given to families about the project explained that the project's aim was to discover how play had changed since the 1950s and '60s. This involved historical research, which is the main focus of this chapter, and research into current play practices. Whereas children had primarily been involved in the collection of data in the earlier Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age project, we endeavoured to make their role more participatory in *Playing the Archive* by engaging them in setting research questions, reviewing and analysing the data collected, and documenting their own play and that of their peers at playtimes, involving a range of methods. Information about current play was largely gathered during playtimes, when the school researchers wore GoPro cameras on their head or chest while playing out or interviewed others using handheld voice recorders. They also wrote observations and reflections in their project notebook, created drawings of their play, and in small groups undertook a play tour of their school's outdoor play areas while wearing the GoPro cameras and narrating, conversing and playing en route. In addition, the university research team arranged for the school researchers to observe 360-degree photographing of the playground and a drone pilot taking aerial photographs of the school site (see [Figure 10.2](#) for an example). The results were shared and discussed with the children, who, among other things, annotated the aerial photographs with their observations on the use of the various spaces for play and games. The author also filmed the school researchers and playtimes more generally with a camcorder, providing third-person

point-of-view footage to complement the school researchers' GoPro footage. We also interviewed the school researchers in small groups about their play practices and their experience of researching play in their school, with the researchers taking part in a film describing their experiences on the project.

In order to find out more about children's play from 60 years previously, the Monteney researchers were invited to engage with copies of Opie Archive child contributions, and to interview school staff and family members about their play. Thus, the project provided opportunities for children to draw from both their peers and adults in their community, and to engage with historical documents, as sources of information about the present and the past within living memory, highlighting the value of memory and the importance of preserving the present to create an archive for future generations. They also saw that children could contribute to those memories and those archives, as well as adults. In this way, the role of the Opie Archive across the wider project was specifically deployed to provoke cross-generational memory. Conversely, the idea of the children contributing to a future archive recalls the relationship between repertoire and archive described in [Chapter 1](#), as well as the Opies' suggestion that memory itself is a form of archive (Opie and Opie, 1959: vii).

Children's lack of opportunity to explore or contribute to the history of play, or to find out about the play of their contemporaries, was reflected in some of the research questions formulated by the Monteney researchers at our first meeting. Having discussed how they conceived of research and understood the idea of 'play', Jackie and I shared that we were interested in which games Monteney children played in the playground and where they got their ideas from, such as television or other people. The children then contributed their own research questions, which focused on:

- Origins – 'How did the most popular games like Tig and Hide-and-Seek first start?' 'Who made sports?'
- The nature and experience of play in the past – 'What did play used to be like?' 'What would play be like now if we was [sic] in the 1950s?'
- Changes in play and in play equipment over time – 'How has play evolved since the 1950s?' 'How has football and other sports become more popular, or like just playing with a skipping rope and hoola hoops and stuff?'
- The relative popularity of different playground games currently

played at Monteney, and of digital versus playground games – Regarding this latter, one boy wondered how computer games could be more popular than old-fashioned games like tig (‘because I don’t see how computer games are more interesting than, like, tig and stuff – I don’t get it’).

(MPJB2018-04-27at002)

Many of these research interests were succinctly summarised in a diagram by a Year 2 researcher (see [Figure 10.1](#)):

They also went on to inform the interview questions that the Monteney researchers formulated to ask their peers and the adults they worked with. Some of the Year 3 children (aged seven to eight years) also recorded their initial hypotheses as to the question of how play has changed since the 1950s. Ben observed:

I think it’s changed by a lot over the years. Very much. Because it was back in 1955 that – that was way long ago. [We’re] in 2018 now. So I think it’s changed by quite a lot. Because back in them times they didn’t have like good games and good laptops and all them stuff. Or they didn’t have them at all. So I think it’s quite changed over a few years.

(MPVR2018-05-01at005)



Figure 10.1 Diagram of project research questions by Daniel, Year 2 researcher, Monteney Primary School, Sheffield, 2018, MPJB2018-04-27p007 © University of Sheffield.

His classmate, Abigail, agreed:

And it has changed a lot. Because if you think about it, today we're on the first of May 2018 and that was whatever date that was in 1955. And all those years have passed. So things have been getting better and better and better, step by step.

(MPVR2018-05-01at005)

Louis broadly agreed but was more concerned with imagining the past before he was born: "Cos I weren't alive back then. A lot of people weren't alive back then. But I know that the games probably weren't as much exciting. So I'm glad I have, like, the friends. I wouldn't go back in time 'cos I wouldn't have all these friends' (MPVR2018-05-01at011). In a continuation of these conversations, the same children realised that they themselves had memories of play from the more recent past. These centred on the Key Stage 1 play areas where they had played up to the end of the previous school year and which are located to the back of the school building (Figure 10.2).

Now in Key Stage 2, and so occupying the play areas to the front and side of the school at breaktimes, together with the children in

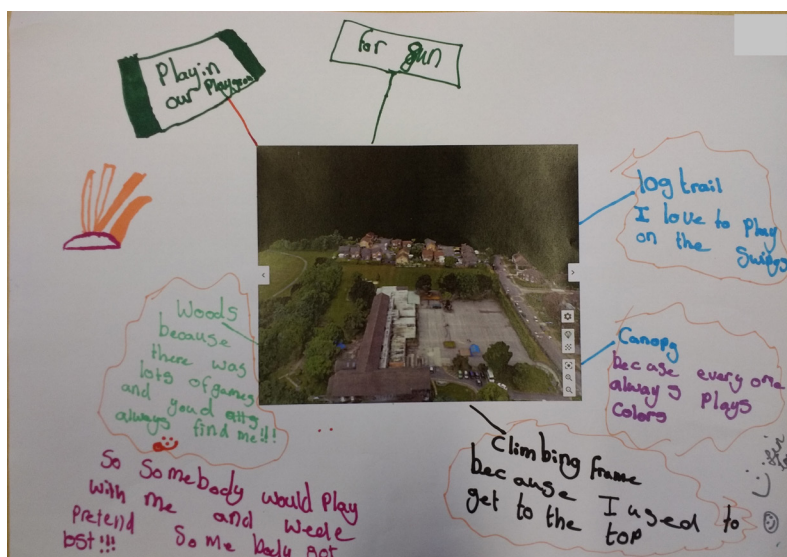


Figure 10.2 Drone aerial photograph of Montenev Primary School, Sheffield, and annotated by Abigail, Year 3 researcher, Montenev Primary School, Sheffield, 2018, MPJB2018-07-13p022 (redacted) © University of Sheffield.

Years 4, 5 and 6 above them, they reminisced about their earlier play practices:

Julia: So we were talking about memories of play and we were just saying that we couldn't go back to 1955 in our memories but we do remember, Ben's just said, just before we switched on the voice recorder, that he remembers, and Louis agreed, some good memories of playing on the other yard. Let's go round everybody starting with Ben. What's one of your best memories from the back yard then?

Ben: Well, I used to play, I used to play a load of tig on that yard because, well, you had a massive concrete area and it gone, it went up to the doors at the back where you would usually go in, go down the corridor for your dinner. And I remember when I used to in the summer play with a few different people, like Anna and Rita. Used to play adventures. It were cool.

Julia: Brilliant, thanks, Ben. Abigail, how about you?

Abigail: Well, when it was not too wet, we was allowed to go round up the banking and go on to the, like, where the climbing frame is and the woods. And I used to be able to play in the woods and on the climbing frame. Then there, I've forgot what it's called, I think it's the science garden.

All: Yeah.

Abigail: Yeah, the science garden. And it's got, like, loads of pebbles in it, some tyres, and there's this thing that you can like swing on and you go across it like that. And it's got a bench and a shed what leads into the woods. And it's just so fun on that yard.

Julia: Thank you. How about you, Megan?

Megan: When I was on that yard I used to, like, go in the forest bit.

Abigail: Yeah, that's what I like.

Megan: Because then you could pretend to have like monster hunting and stuff.

Abigail: Yeah, we used to play that.

Megan: Yeah, and fairy hunting.

Julia: And fairy hunting?

Megan: Yeah.

Ben: I did. I did a monster hunt and I did actually find a monster, but it was a bee.

- Julia: It was a what?
- Ben: It was a bee. And I just ran away, and it didn't sting me luckily.
- Julia: We haven't let Louis speak. Louis, how about you?
- Louis: I really liked it because I've made like new friends, like Megan, because she only just joined. But I have a really good memory of where there's a tree out there that everyone climbs. Well, I climbed up it and I got all the way to the top of the tree, so Mr R___ [teacher] had to come and help me down.
- Ben: Yeah, I remember that.
- Julia: Thank you all for your memories of play. That's brilliant.
(MPJB2018-05-01a001)

These appear to be positive and vivid memories, highlighting aspects of the space and play equipment, particularly enjoyable games and memorable incidents.

As a result of this conversation, the tours of the school's play areas filmed by the researchers in small groups were extended to include, in the case of the older children, not only their current play spaces but those they occupied when they were younger. The wearable cameras enabled them to interact playfully with those spaces as well as recording their spoken memories, observations and discussions about them. In Megan's tour, for example (MPGP2018-05-01v013), she explains, 'This is the forest bit and there's lot of trees' as they enter the Key Stage 1 wooded play area. Together with Ben, Louis and Abigail, Megan announces, 'The climbing tree. I think I remember where it is. There were a tree that Louis climbed and he needed Mr R___ to come and fetch him down.' Once there, they all start climbing the tree again, Louis declaring that he's 'going to climb up it like the giant gorilla (does? George?)'. Megan gently teases him, 'Do you want Mr R___ to come and get you down again?' She then cautions, 'Well, you'll have to get down quick before you stand on Abigail [who is climbing up behind Louis] because if you stand on Abigail, that's a serious injury caused.'

Megan's commentary brings into focus the difference between then and now. They are older and more proficient, bigger and more capable. Her memory invokes their smaller and more vulnerable status, their greater dependency on the teachers. In climbing the tree again in the present and getting down without difficulty, they enact their competence, confidence and capacity. A previously higher-risk situation can now be joked about, a source of friendly banter in which Megan

herself playfully adopts the voice of a responsible adult, warning Louis about the risk of standing on Abigail's head.

Louis' likening himself to 'the giant gorilla' also suggests his awareness of himself as physically bigger than when he originally climbed the tree. Although the audio recording is somewhat unclear here, it is possible that Louis is making reference to the film *Rampage*, which had been released just weeks before the Montenev researchers made this recording, and concerns an over-sized gorilla named George (Wikipedia, [n.d.](#)).

Megan's recollections take a similar turn when she revisits the tyres which have been cut in half and set into the ground for the children to crawl through. She comments, 'One more memory is we used to play underneath these when we were small enough, but I don't fit anymore.' She physically tries to get her legs through the hole but is unable to, as if using the play equipment as a yardstick to confirm how much she has grown (MPGP2018-05-01v013).

This underscores the embodied and sensory nature of play experiences. For these children, revisiting and physically interacting with the Key Stage 1 play spaces they formerly frequented not only triggered memories of what they once did there and what they were once like, but also provided a perspective on their current selves and their developing abilities and identities. We can see how memories are shaped by and contingent on the present and affected by the life course and perceptions of 'generation', for children as well as adults.

New perspectives were also opened up on the play of others of different generations during the oral history interviews undertaken by the Montenev researchers about six weeks later. During this time, they were introduced to the now historical work of Iona and Peter Opie, their methods and their publications. Working in small groups of mixed ages, the Montenev researchers then reflected on their particular interests in relation to play from the 1950s on, and formulated these into questions for an audio-recorded oral history interview with an adult. Three adults agreed to take part, two members of school staff and Mary, whose grandchildren had previously attended Montenev. Born in 1953 (MPJB2018_06_21a001), Mary had taken part in a study conducted by Jackie Marsh and myself several years earlier considering the relationship between media, commercial markets and children's play in the UK between 1950 and 2011, funded by the British Academy (see Marsh and Bishop, [2014](#), for the results of this study).¹

Space does not permit detailed analysis of these oral history sessions, which are rich in terms of both content, method and the

dynamics of the interaction, so we will focus here on just a few salient moments in Mary's interviews. The children ask her about who she played with, what she played and where she played, and her favourite thing about playing. They heard about making up games and fashioning skipping ropes from washing lines, large families and small houses without central heating, playing in the street, games like What's the Time, Mr Wolf (which they were familiar with), and Kick the Can (which was unfamiliar), tin baths in front of the fire, having to take cod liver oil and malt every morning, and more. Partway through the session, Mary took the initiative and asked the Montenev researchers what they liked to play. Two girls demonstrated hand-clapping, which Mary recognised as 'an old game – we used to play that' (MPJB2018_06_21a001). Another described playing Powerpuff Girls, displaying her detailed knowledge of these characters from an American animated television series and demonstrating their signature moves and gestures. A Year 5 girl, Chrissy, aged 9–10, then offered that she played Zombie Apocalypse. Mary first presumed that this was played on a computer, but Chrissy said not, adding that she and her friends made it up. She went on to describe a touch chase game, the name of which may be a reference to the R-rated 2011 television film of the same name (Lyon, 2011). Following an elaborate procedure to choose who is 'on' in the game, the chaser is a zombie, and the other players, when 'tiggered', became zombies too and joined the chaser to catch the other players until they were all zombies. She recalled, 'And once it took me and my friend like ages, and it's like really hard to get everyone.' Mary realised at this point that the game was more familiar than she had first supposed, saying:

I think these games that you kids are all playing are all games what I used to play when I were little but you've like all added Powerpuff games in and ... your own characters, because you see these characters on the TV or on books. Powerpuff Girls, I know that's on the television because I've seen that ... So you're still playing, you're still doing nice things but you've just added your own names on.

(MPJB2018_06_21a001)

Whereas on her arrival, Mary had wondered if the session was intended to teach the children the old games, and the Montenev researchers certainly learned about games and Mary's childhood experience of playing them some 60 years earlier, it transpired through Mary's own initiative of

asking the children about their games that they were already playing what were to her 'old games'. Thus, she learned something about their play too.

A rather different situation occurred when Abigail, one of the Year 3 researchers, took up the optional task for the project of taking home a voice recorder to interview her grandfather, Ronald, about his memories of play. Having established that he mainly played cricket, tennis and football as a child, she moved on to ask him,

Abigail: So what was your favourite game when you was a child?

Ronald: I would say cricket.

Abigail: Cricket, yeah?

Ronald: And I still like cricket. I watch cricket on the telly.

Abigail: Hm. So do you prefer the play how kids play now or do you prefer it to when you was a child?

Ronald: Well, I don't play it now, do I? Because I'm too old. But I used to play it when I were your age.

(MPJB2018-06-00a001)

Despite this misdirection, she persisted in seeking out his opinion by wording her question another way:

Abigail: Yeah, I mean, how do you feel –? Do you know how you watch kids play now, do you think they play better than what you did when you was a kid?

Ronald: No.

Abigail: Yeah, because we still have cricket in 2018.

Ronald: Yes. But children play with their computers now. They don't play proper games, do they, with all their friends?

Abigail: No. So.

Ronald: You can't talk to me while chewing a biscuit at the same time. We can't make out what you're saying then, can we?

(MPJB2018-06-00a001)

Despite the change of subject and reprimand, she persevered, broadening the interview out still further to related childhood experiences:

Abigail: Well, when you was a kid, was it just like about sports or were there other things you could play?

Ronald: We just made our own fun. Because we didn't have.

Abigail: Phones.

Ronald: We didn't have mobile phones and computers and.

Abigail: You had to write. You couldn't just quickly type a message and then send it. You had to write a letter, didn't you?

Ronald: Yes, oh yeah.

Abigail: Did you.

Ronald: I can remember the very first calculator coming in to school. And there were arguments about whether we should be allowed to use them or not.

Abigail: So how did you get told off? Yeah, how did you get told off?

Ronald: At school?

Abigail: Yeah.

Ronald: We used to get the cane.

Abigail: And you preferred the cane, did you?

Ronald: The teacher used to have a stick and he used to whack us on the hand. We used to get 'six of the best', three on one hand and three on the other hand. And then made to sit on us hands. And everyone in't class. And the girls got the slipper on their bum. They had to bend over and got slipper. The boys got the cane. Didn't do me any harm. Keeps you good.

Abigail: Right. So, do you feel happy that it's changed since you were a child?

Ronald: No.

Abigail: No, you wish it would stay the same?

Ronald: Yes, because it wasn't broken so they didn't need to fix it.

Abigail: Right. Well, we'll finish there.

(MPJB2018-06-00a001)

Recalling that, as noted above, Abigail had imagined at the start of the project that play had got 'better and better and better, step by step', her grandfather's directly contrary view may have come as a bit of a surprise. On the other hand, she is already aware of his negative view of mobile phones, finishing his sentence beginning 'Because we didn't have –' for him. A little irritated by her questioning, he tries on several occasions to assert control over the interview, and even knock her off course, but she is determined. He eventually shares more about his childhood, expressing pride in his resilience in the face of tough times. Abigail listens carefully and demonstrates astute understanding of the implications of his answers, such as when she extends his preference for the games of his childhood compared with hers and applies it to the question of punishment, by asking him 'And you preferred the cane, did you?', with no hint of irony. She concludes by demonstrating her understanding of

his point of view, despite the fact that his perspective is so different from her own and so critical of present-day children's play.

Remarkable as this interview is for the resilience and perspicacity shown by Abigail, it is also a reminder of the generational divide and how this may affect oral history interviewing undertaken by children. When adults hold a devolutionary view of children's play, children as interviewers are potentially placed in an invidious situation, in which they may elicit opinions that are disparaging of them and their peers. Structurally, too, they occupy an anomalous position in terms of the interview situation, in that the interviewer generally holds a certain amount of power by being the one who decides on and poses the questions, directing the course of the interaction. This is not a role always accorded to children by adults and may result in role conflict or ambiguity for interviewer and interviewee alike.

Concerned that the project's participatory methods had resulted in this case in placing Abigail in a difficult situation with her grandfather, I discussed it with her the following year when we returned to the school to analyse the data with the Montenev researchers:

Julia: I was just really interested, did you know your grandad didn't feel so happy about children's play today?

Abigail: Erm well, I knew he didn't really like any of the kind of songs or anything that are around now. And I thought that, even though we still play like rounders and stuff now, and cricket ... but I didn't know that he didn't like, that it had changed. I thought that he was okay – well obviously he is okay with it – but I mean I thought, I didn't know that he'd want it to stay the same.

(MPJB2019-05-03at007)

Abigail had chosen to interview Ronald because she and he played cricket together in the field beside his house and she 'just thought he might want to talk about what he still liked playing' (MPJB2019-05-03at007). I brought up the idea of the generational divide:

Julia: And going back to the idea that a lot of adults ... are you aware of that some adults do say things like 'oh we don't think children play like we used to do' and –

Abigail: Yeah.

Julia: 'Play isn't as good any more'?

Abigail: Well, I think it's the opposite. I'm only joking really.

- Julia: But have you heard adults say that sort of thing?
- Abigail: Erm, yes. Like, again, my grandad says that. But he says that he's happy that it hasn't changed too much, so that you don't play sports any more. And like he thinks that. He thought it would have changed where there's no more sports, it's just technology, so he's happy that there's both technology and. The thing is now he's got a Samsung Galaxy [mobile phone] and he says that he's glad that there's like technology to use better, because he loves YouTube and stuff. But he's also like fit because he does lots of bike riding, because he even mentioned bicycle. And he likes walking and he loves doing cricket.
- Julia: Oh, that's fascinating. So he's coming round to using technology like you do perhaps and he's?
- Abigail: Yeah, but he does not like any of our music.

(MPJB2019-05-03at007)

Abigail's follow-up observations suggest that her relationship with her grandfather is still intact and that the intergenerational conversation is ongoing and nuanced.

Having been introduced to the Opies and their books, as mentioned above, the Monteney researchers then looked at examples of games from the Opie Archive that had been written by children. We asked them if they could work out how to play the game from the description, if they recognised anything in the game, and how they found the handwriting in the examples. Aidan and Jack in Year 5 (aged 9–10), looking at the following example (Figure 10.3), went on to have this discussion:

- Aidan: This game is called Chain Tig. And after we've read it, it is exactly the same thing that I play at the scout group.
- Jack: And Chain Tig is virtually Tiggy Build Up and –.
- Aidan: Apart from you have to hold hands. So if I tig Jack, hold hands. And then we have to go tig everyone else so that everyone's been tug. And if you do it in a cramped space, it's a lot easier because they trying dodge past you, go into you and stuff. Really fun. And I can't believe it's actually been in this letter which was like, been like from ages ago and yet we play it at our scout group which is like –. And nearly it's over a hundred years old. But it's just kind of hard to believe it.

(MPJB2018-06-18v001)

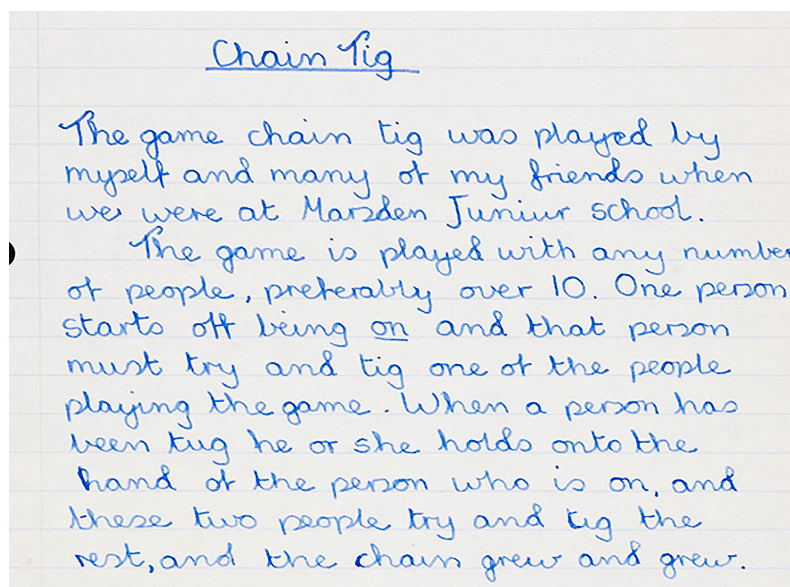


Figure 10.3 Description of 'Chain Tig', boy, 13 years, Mansfield County Secondary School, Brierfield, Lancashire, 1972. Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 17 fol. 87r. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Aidan is the only one who has played Chain Tig as such and is more sceptical that it is like Tiggy Build Up, in which, as in Zombie Apocalypse described above, the people caught join the chaser in catching the others but do not hold hands. Aidan therefore sees more of the differences, first emphasising that it is like Tiggy Build Up and then saying that it's 'completely different really' or allowing that 'it's just a bit like it' (MPJB2018-06-18v001).

Meanwhile, although others in the group are able to work out from their examples how the games were played, they do not see so much similarity to their own because they are different in the details of wording or the name of the game. Thus, while adults may make connections between games with underlying similarities, the perspective of young people themselves can value the detail, and this plays an important part in their perception of 'sameness' and 'different-ness'. As discussed in Bishop (2014a) in relation to a clapping game, this emphasis on the detail enables children to claim ownership of their form of the game and in many cases justifies their oft-heard claim that they 'made it up'. This emphasis on differentiation in the small detail may affect their perception of games played by different generations as 'the same' or similar to their own. The exact nature of the name and the

instructions for Chain Tig clearly impressed Aidan in relation to the age of the document he was looking at but it was Jack who saw parallels. Perceptions are nuanced and, again, it is vital not to assume that children's points of view and experience in the playground are uniform or the same as adults have experienced.

Ecclesfield School, January–June 2019

In this final section, we turn to the intergenerational work at Ecclesfield School. As mentioned above, Ecclesfield School was formerly a grammar school from whom the Opies received a set of responses to their second questionnaire in 1954. These were sent to the Opies by the students' English teacher, Linden Huddleston, who comments to the Opies that he chose students aged 12–13 years because 'they write quickly & are not too removed from what they soon begin to regard as *juvenilia*' (Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Opie 10 fol. 544r). Here again, we find the teacher perceives a generational divide between the play practices of younger and older children. Unlike the Aberdeen contributions exemplified in the section entitled 'Generational divides in the Opie Archive contributions', however, there is no reference to this among the Ecclesfield Grammar School submissions themselves, where the more discursive responses are phrased in the present tense. We also know, as described in [Chapter 2](#), that the Opies visited the school and spoke directly to the students in more detail about the things they had described in their written contributions.

When we approached Ecclesfield School about participating in the current project, there was already a programme of intergenerational engagement taking place. Among other things, this took the form of 'Superjam tea parties', in which older people from the surrounding area were invited into the school and the students catered for the tea party, served the food, provided entertainment and mingled with the visitors. The school was therefore sympathetic to the aims of the project and arranged for us to work with a group of 14 students in Year 8 and their art teacher. The students were thus the same age as those who had contributed to the Opies' survey in 1954.

Work on the project took place at the school in the period January–June 2019. During this time, students explored the Opie questionnaires and documented each other's play and leisure activities both in and out of school, undertook oral history interviews about play and childhood memories with a group of older adults who had been involved in the

Superjam tea parties, and took part in making sound recordings of the original Ecclesfield Grammar School contributions to the Opie Archive to be incorporated into the *Time Telephone* installation (see [Chapter 7](#)). The focus here, however, is on a further activity in which the students created their own board games designed to prompt playful intergenerational conversations about games and rhymes, play and leisure.

Working in small groups, the Ecclesfield students first researched into board games using the internet and their personal experiences and began to come up with ideas for their own which they then modelled from paper and card. They then explored and created an array of resources, both historical and contemporary, and digital and non-digital, that could be incorporated into the game to stimulate intergenerational exchange. Students thus explored the online archival materials of the Ecclesfield & District Archives and selected historical images taken locally of play, sport and leisure. They also filmed themselves playing games such as British Bulldog, Duck Duck Goose, and Tag in the playground. Board-game playing pieces, such as tiny teddy bears and ‘Gengars’ (a type of Pokémon), were also produced using a 3D printer and then painted. Dice were made from a net template and painted as well. In one session, colleagues from the University of Sheffield brought in a VR headset, with students trying it out to experience a rollercoaster ride and discussing their experiences of VR at home and at theme parks, from which they thought about stories of games in which feeling dizzy was a major element, which in turn led on to stories of resulting injuries (ECJB2019-03-19v007). These experiences invoke the appeal of risky play referred to elsewhere in this book (see [Chapters 4 and 8](#)), as well as the specific role of vertiginous sensation as a recognised aspect of play, notably in the notion of ‘Ilinx’ in Caillois’s typology of games (1961).

In the resulting games, the intergenerational elements were worked into the play in varying, and sometimes humorous or ingenious, ways. For example, in one game, the creators drew on their experience of doing the oral history interviews for players who landed on a particular square ([Figure 10.4](#)):

So we’ve got a Chance and then. Well, we’ve got a Chance here and then we were thinking a Truth and a Dare here. So like a Truth would be ‘Do summat scary’. Like tell summat scary that you did as a kid. Then, like – [for the Dare], do a dance like you used to do when you were a child.

(ECJB2019-03-28v005)

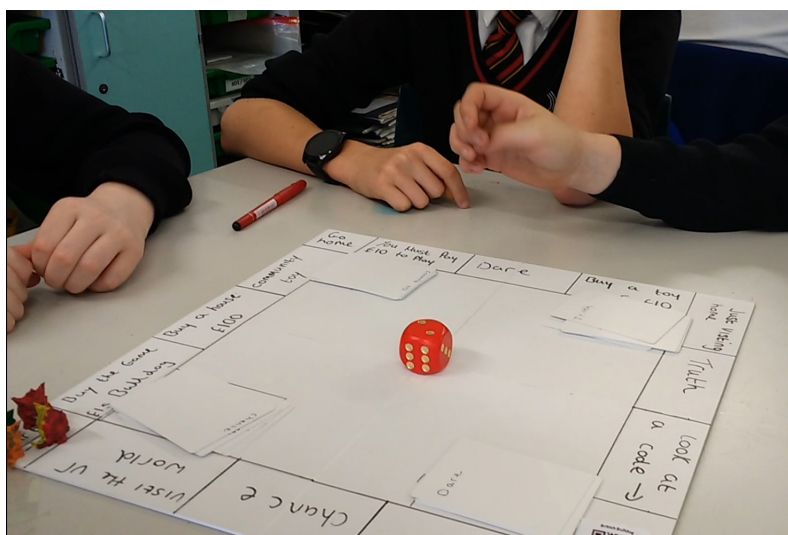


Figure 10.4 ‘Truth or dare’ board-game elements, created by Year 8 researchers, Ecclesfield School, Sheffield, 2019, still from ECJM 2019-03-28v010. © University of Sheffield.

Further suggestions for a Truth card were ‘What’s the biggest lie you’ve ever told to like your parents, and stuff like that.’ Thinking of the Community Chest cards in Monopoly, another member of the group playfully reimagined the cards so that the dreaded ‘Go directly to jail’ card, and its coveted opposite ‘Get out of jail free’, in Monopoly became ‘Go home’ (or ‘Go home for your tea’) and ‘Stay out to play for another two hours’, respectively (ECJB2019-03-28v005).

Another game had a snakes and ladders concept combined with activities related to squares of different colours. Depending on the square, players had to sing a rhyme, answer a question about play, or use a mobile device to scan a QR code which took them to one of the aforementioned videos featuring members of the board-game creators playing one of their own games (Figure 10.5).

In this instance, one of the videos featured a game which the students called the Knife Game, although they played it with a pen (Figure 10.6).

The game involves spreading the fingers of one hand on a surface and using the other hand to tap between each one in order while chanting, to the rhythm of the tapping pen, ‘I have five fingers, and if this goes wrong, I will have four.’ On each repeat, the player takes away a finger until all have been removed. They then start again increasing the speed of the game.

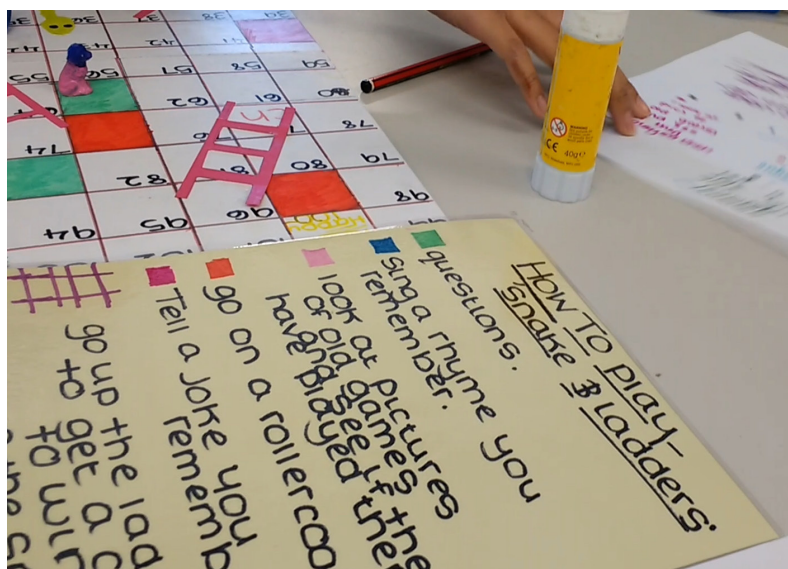


Figure 10.5 Key to activities in ‘Snakes and ladders’ game, created by Year 8 researchers, Ecclesfield School, Sheffield, 2019, still from ECJM 2019-03-28v012. © University of Sheffield.

Anya and Danielle learned this game in their last year or so at primary school, where Anya had seen it played with a knife taken from the school canteen. She described how it could be played even in the classroom, although teachers found the tapping noise annoying and the students took to using pencils with rubbers affixed to the end. Sometimes, in a more trusting version, the game is played by two people, one proffering their outspread fingers, the other tapping in between. Or the game is played by individuals but in competition with each other. Anya thought:

If you’re doing it to someone else’s. I think in primary it was more popular to do it to someone else’s because you didn’t really know the dangers if it went wrong or something. But now we tend to just do it on our own. And it’s like whoever can like keep going, if there are like four of us on our table who are all doing it, whoever like got their finger first would be out.

(ECJB2019-04-16a001)

Although presented as an example of contemporary play by the students, this is in fact one of a number of games of risk involving a sharp blade. The Opies quote the account of a 13-year-old boy:

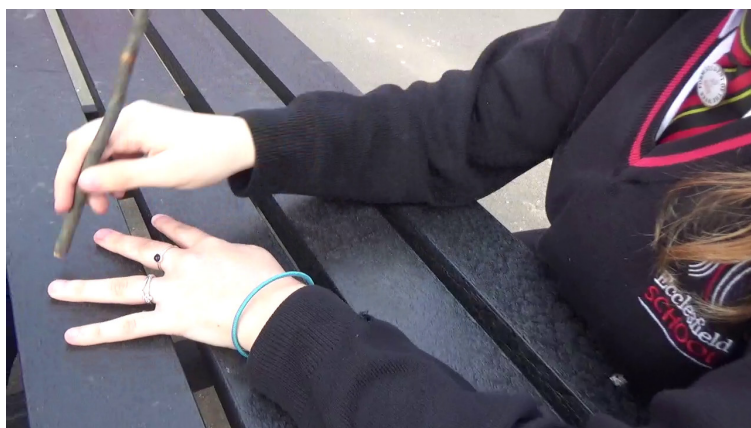


Figure 10.6 'Knife Game', played by Year 8 researchers, Ecclesfield School, Sheffield, 2019, stills from ECJB2019-03-20v007. © University of Sheffield.

You need a knife, preferably a large one with a sharp edge and a good point... First of all you spreadeagle your left hand. Then you take the knife in your other hand and as quick as you can stick the knife in the spaces between the fingers without cutting your finger. When you are experienced enough you make it harder, for instance you thrust the knife between the third and fourth fingers, then between the first and second, then between the second and third fingers, and then between the thumb and first finger.

(Opie and Opie, 1969: 272)

Further examples of knife games, such as Split the Kipper, are described by the Opies (1969: 219–21) and Roud (2010: 145–6). This is thus a rich example with much potential for cross-generational talk around the ways that games may persist, vary and be adapted to circumstances, and which may involve various degrees of risk.

Conclusion: towards the ‘been’ child

Karl Hanson (2017) has advocated moving beyond the binary of the ‘being’ and the ‘becoming’ child which characterised the emergence of the new sociology of childhood in the 1980s and ’90s. He argues:

To understand children, individually and collectively, and childhood as a social category, I feel that we should give due consideration not only to how present and future are balanced but also to more explicitly embrace children’s and childhood’s past. Conceptually, the dialectic between the ‘being’ and the ‘becoming’ child needs to be complemented by a third component, the ‘been’ child.

(Hanson, 2017: 281)

Although not entirely absent from previous studies, he urges greater attention to this ‘trialectical conceptualization’ to be inclusive of ‘more complex relationships between children’s past, present and future’ (2017: 282).

As we have seen in this chapter, noticing the ‘been child’ introduces dimensions of memory and identity formation. What is remembered, and how, is shaped by the context in which remembering takes place, not only in different points of childhood, but across the life course. This in turn demonstrates that ‘temporality is not a linear process but that we

can find simultaneous and continuing traces of the past in the present, allowing to overcome even the binary between childhood and adulthood' (Hanson, 2017: 282).

Starting with the generational divide in discourses about play, strategies enabling communication about play between children of the same and different ages and stages, between children and adults, and between children of the present and the past, as represented by historical sources produced by past children about their childhoods, have been shown to provide spaces for cultural exchange and connection. These spaces have the potential to demonstrate the relational nature of the categories, such as child, youth and adult, and their complexity, and to employ the power of the archive to trouble the generational order. We need to make more opportunities for this to happen.

Note

- 1 'A Study of the Relationship between Media, Commercial Markets and Children's Play in the UK between 1950 and 2011' was generously supported by British Academy Research Grant no. SG111215 and led to Marsh and Bishop's publication, *Changing Play* (2014).

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Part IV

Future play

Ludic time travel: from the archive to the digital playground and the Play Observatory

John Potter and Kate Cowan

Laminates of experience and Circuit of Play: models of continuity and change

Playing the Archive built on the earlier project *Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age* (Burn and Richards, 2014) in significant ways, taking on some of the emergent themes of that work but expanding the interrogation of continuity and change in the context of popular media cultures in the era of social media and multiplayer online gaming. In the intervening years, further pervasive digital developments in the form of greater access to social media, and the emergence of a plethora of screens of all kinds which were not available widely in the previous incarnation of the project, both played a part. These proved to be highly significant both as markers of distribution and as hubs for composition and remix. As Willett has observed (2011), there is much more to say about children's playground 'media-inflected' play than simply noting popular cultural references. The instances we and our child researchers recorded were iterations, rather than simply references, which were overlaid with traditional platforms and folkloric imagination as laminates of cultural experience (Potter and Cowan, 2020). As proposed in our earlier article and again in [Chapter 6](#) of this volume, these laminates are:

- *Lifeworlds* – Cultural resources for playground games drawn from family and home
- *Folkloric imagination* – Resources which enabled reworking traditions of playground games and lore, playing with the templates of children's games from years gone by

- *Community and belonging* – Connectedness within the space, common reference points and stories of the school, including imaginary figures, memories of years together at school
- *Play as media remix* – Resources for play drawn from media culture, texts, practices and artefacts

They are represented, layered on a school playground, in [Figure 11.1](#).

Each of these ‘laminates of experience’ contributes to the developing emergent identity and disposition of the young children who play the games. However, it is important to note that the way they are listed above does not represent a *hierarchy*. No single laminate is more essential than another. They are each observable at different times in play, though at any given moment any one of them may have more salience than the others. For example, the clapping games we observed often consisted of reworkings of transmitted forms from years gone by, recognisable as a part of a canon of such games. At the same time, these games and instances of play were in transition to new forms. Digital artefacts joined the rhyming scheme and gestures in performance brought lived experience and community into play. What we noted as salient in the reworking of the ‘Lemonade’ rhyme was the introduction of the ‘iPhone’. We observed a traditional rhyme scheme overlaid with a digital artefact (for a fuller account of this, see [Chapter 6](#)). In this moment of play, the other laminates were present but not as salient, and the media reference points, along with the reference to the device, were all somewhere in the mix. In this way, perhaps, contemporary children’s playground games

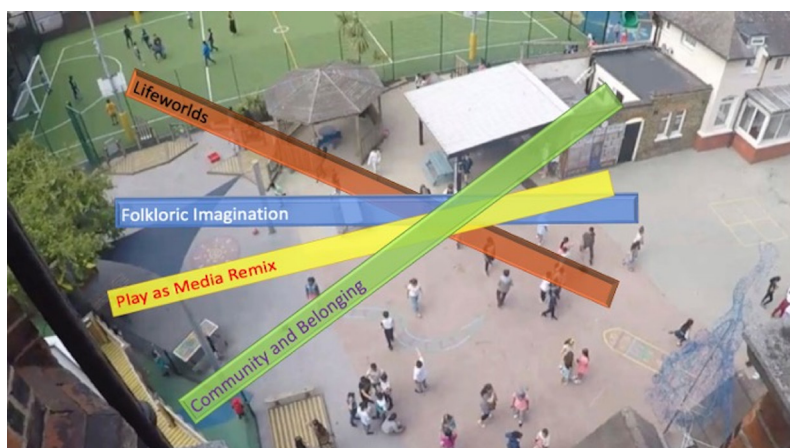


Figure 11.1 Laminates of experience in play. © John Potter.

potentially represent a site of post-digital activity, wherein ‘the digital’ is enmeshed and entangled with ‘the human’, and not easily separated, in the experience of play (Jandrić et al., 2018; Potter, 2024).

So, how *are* these laminates drawn together in children’s play? If they are the observable elements in contemporary playgrounds, as the work of *Playing the Archive* suggests, how are they operationalised in practice? How do they come to be? In [Chapter 1](#), a way of understanding this was proposed in the ‘Circuit of Play’ model: ‘Interface–Archive–Repertoire’. These are the overarching dynamic processes within which the playground games circulate through ‘Space–Performance–Memory–Transmission’. Below is the diagram again in [Figure 11.2](#).

The Opies understood this well, and their enduring contribution was to locate the study of this process in the world of the players of these games, by asking the children themselves about them and, importantly, how they first learned to play them.

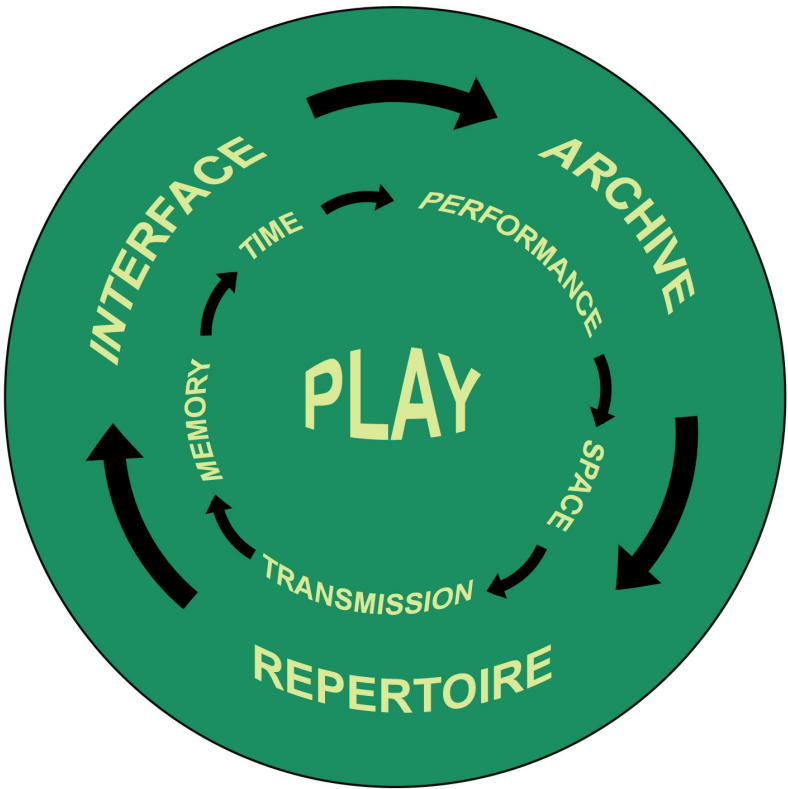


Figure 11.2 The Circuit of Play. © Andrew Burn.

This circuit further instantiates ‘repertoire’ as a key concept and, drawing on popular media culture as a source, the play ‘repertoire’ expands in multiple directions. More often than not, as we have seen in [Chapters 5 and 6](#), this has meant children inventing and learning from each other how to bring contemporary popular cultural references into play, both as markers of identity and belonging, and as markers of affective entanglements with the digital. We have also seen how children’s play repertoires incorporate forms of half-belief ([Chapter 4](#)); and topographic, even cartographic knowledge of and engagement with landscapes ([Chapters 8 and 9](#)).

Meanwhile, the interfaces which enable traffic between archive and repertoire appear in many guises throughout the book and the projects on which it reports, from the cardboard boxes of the Opie Archive itself to the forms of digital interface explored in *Playing the Archive*, indicating the importance of such portals for the kinds of transformation, transmission and communication without which no ludic or archival process would be possible.

Cultural memory and the archive: community-building and belonging

Cultural memory, continuity and change were discussed in [Chapter 10](#), which provides detail on how intergenerational conversations in the project supported an enlarged vision of the new sociology of childhood: not only a consideration of the representation of the child as ‘being’ (James, 2009) but paying attention to the child who has ‘been’ (Hanson, 2017). These are also important elements in the ‘Circuit of Play’ model, connecting playground games in particular with the child players of the past, not only with ‘repertoire’ and ‘transmission’ concepts but also with community-building and belonging, one of the key ‘laminates of experience’. The act of remembering ‘aids the organisation of social and cultural life by constantly endowing us with a meaningful communicative currency out of which we can build social relationships, group affiliations and consensus’ (Keightley, 2008). We have seen throughout the projects on children’s games that this is as true for play as for other forms of social interaction and organisation.

One of the aims of *Playing the Archive*, as explored in many of the preceding chapters, was to find ways to bring the Opie Archive to the attention of contemporary children by way of exploring concepts of cultural memory, time and space with them. By introducing the ‘archive’

itself as a key concept, we invited children to see that their recordings of their play, their ‘acts of remembering’, were important for people in the future who were interested in learning about their play.

We employed a range of methods which included ways of introducing the archive to the child researchers and embedding the ‘acts of remembering’ in the research process. For example, photocopied original written descriptions of games from the Opie Archive were presented to children in ‘archive boxes’. We invited the children to take them out, read them to each other, and re-enact them in their own, contemporary playgrounds. This sparked a great deal of interest and helped to foreground the idea of the ‘record’ of experience, the voice from the past played out in the present.

Perhaps the most successful of all the ways in which we brought the ‘acts of remembering’ to the attention of the children was through the *Time Telephone*, whose development as an interface to the archive by the UCL CASA team is outlined in [Chapter 7](#) of this volume. This was the red telephone box fitted with a rotary phone on which calls could be made which dialled up playground games of ‘the past’, recordings of selected archival Opie games read by children and accessed via a concealed computer. Even before the box was constructed, the children responded with curiosity and wonder to the analogue rotary telephone when it was first introduced to them. The moment the idea of being able to ‘call the past’ on the phone was suggested, there was an intake of breath from the child researchers which is audible on the recording from that day. Children were involved in developing the concept further – in fact, if they’d had their way and the funding could have stretched that far, there would have been dry ice and a mirror ball in the phone box. The *Time Telephone* generated further interest from a wider audience of children and adults alike, beyond the project, at the Festival of Play held at the Museum of Childhood (now the Young V&A) in London in the summer of 2019 and subsequently in permanent installations in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield and at the UCL Institute of Education.

In considering continuity and change, we were keen to keep listening to the children as they explained thoughts and observations, rather than simply, for example, recording instances of media references. In this, as outlined in [Chapter 1](#) and throughout this book, we were following the principles and methods of the Opies, with their belief in children as the authentic research informants and experts on their play. Children told us about their games and how they were constantly learning from each other, from their consumption of social and broadcast media, and by developing new adaptations of games they knew.

Towards the end of the project, we extended our engagement with children further and invited them to join us in deeper thinking about continuity and change. During our final discussions with one of the groups of child researchers, we asked them to speculate on the nature of change in games, and how they move through time, adapt and survive in new forms. One of the children, an 11-year-old boy, hypothesised that:

It's like evolution. If games stayed the same, even if they're really good games, they'll die out. The games that will stay are the ones most adaptable to change, just like animals and plants in evolution. Games have to evolve to suit people's interests in a different time period, so – but if a game stays the same it will eventually no longer suit people's interests and will die out as a game. For a game to survive through the ages it needs to keep modifying the rules again and again in order to suit people's interests for that time period.

(Child researcher quoted in Potter and Cowan, 2020)

This contribution took us by surprise and was exceptional in its argumentation and theory-building but many other interactions with children in the Playing the Archive schools also demonstrated an appetite to be taken seriously as researchers, and even theorists. They had things to say about play as an area of human experience of great importance to them. In this sense, our research frequently became a place in which hierarchies were playfully flattened and the sharing of valuable interpretive insights occurred. Our research space in this sense became a 'third space' (Hawley and Potter, 2022) in which meanings were made from moment to moment between the participants. Their proximity to one another and intimate knowledge of peer cultures lent richness to the contributions throughout and led some of us to think about what this meant for play research when play was restricted.

The Play Observatory: archives of play in exceptional times

When the restrictions associated with the global Covid-19 pandemic arrived in early 2020, regulating social contact, movement and travel, it was inevitable that there would be a serious impact on children's play. Along with the severest of health emergencies came limitations on where, when, how and with whom children could play. Schools and play spaces such as playgrounds were closed. Simultaneously, restrictions increased

the time children spent at home with their families and necessitated a re-evaluation of the possibilities of digitally mediated, screen-based play. We noted a lack of research directed at understanding children's experiences of the pandemic, specifically of 'pandemic play', and applied to the UK Research and Innovation emergency Covid-19 research fund for support to set up a new project, the 'Play Observatory', to create an online survey tool to collect examples of children's pandemic play in the form of video, sound, image and text files, supplemented with in-depth online ethnographic case studies of a sub-section of child respondents. It then established an archive of this material, as far as possible along the lines of the Opie Archive, as a research tool for future generations, a repository of the experience of play at a significant moment in history.

The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and was known formally as 'A National Observatory of Children's Play Experiences during COVID-19'. It ran from October 2020 through to March 2022. During this time we set out to develop an archival collection offering insights into the nature of children's play and culture in periods of adversity and the relationship between play and wellbeing. Just as for *Playing the Archive*, we also sought to uncover children's own viewpoints and diverse lived experiences and to explore ways in which adults could support children's wellbeing in difficult times. Given the fact that the project had to be conducted entirely at a distance due to pandemic restrictions, we had to be innovative in our data collection methods and navigate both the challenges and opportunities presented by online and digital methods, while at the same time attempting to stay true to the overarching principles of child engagement in the research (Cowan et al., 2021).

The University of Sheffield team were largely responsible for the development of the survey part of the Play Observatory, which was designed to be dual purpose: both a social science research tool and the 'foundations of a historical archive' (Olusoga et al., 2022). Children and their parents or carers were guided through a series of screens which explained how contributions could be made to the collection and the importance of consent to be represented therein. The screens themselves were designed to be child-friendly and featured a cartoon character named 'Peeps' which recalled the famous historical diarist, while at the same time presenting an image designed to appeal to a contemporary audience. Behind the scenes, the contributions were organised into a secure database which collected information organised into fields for archival purposes. Further qualitative research followed in the form of online interviews with children and parents or carers who formed a representative subset of the contributors. There were also

opportunities for children to join an online filmmaking workshop to give further expressive form to their pandemic play experiences (Cowan et al., 2022; Cannon et al., 2023). These ways of working online with children were inevitably very different to the experiences of working in the playground with the child researchers in *Playing the Archive*, and yet there were observable moments of child agency in the recorded interviews, with, for example, children on-screen in Zoom taking us into their play spaces via video calls, changing the camera angle to address us directly, and giving voice to their experiences, both positive and negative, of pandemic play.

The Play Observatory found that, despite significant restrictions on their day-to-day lives, children continued to find ways to play throughout the pandemic. This included adapting existing games and inventing new games to play when confined to homes under lockdowns or quarantine, finding ways to play with friends, family and neighbours that observed social distancing, and maintaining playful contact remotely when unable to be with others in person. We collected many instances of play becoming digitally mediated – for instance, children playing hide-and-seek with faraway families through interviews on video calls – with new ‘hybrid’ forms of play emerging and blurring boundaries around digital and non-digital practices (Cowan et al., 2021). The study therefore highlighted ways in which play continued despite pandemic restrictions, thanks to children’s creativity and resourcefulness.

The Play Observatory also highlighted play as a deeply significant way in which children explore, and respond to, the world around them. Play often became ‘remixed’ to include contemporary references to the pandemic, in which games with longstanding histories were given apt new iterations – for instance, ‘Tig’ chasing games that alluded to the transmission of coronavirus when touched (Bishop, 2023). Practices that quickly became part of a ‘new normal’ frequently featured in children’s play during this time – for instance, making masks for toys, enacting social distancing in role-play and making representations of the virus out of various everyday materials. The findings highlight the enduring power of play, as a deeply meaningful activity in which children explore issues of interest and significance to them, showing awareness and understanding of the world around them. Play also seemed to offer a form of continuity and control during these challenging times, capable of adaptation and ‘evolution’, enabling safe and playful exploration of changes in the wider world around them.

As we moved further in our analysis, we began to see pandemic play as being of relevance to emergent theories of materiality, the post-digital

and posthumanism, among other framings (Potter et al., 2024b). Olusoga, Bannister and Bishop found evidence in the Play Observatory collection of ways to challenge adult assumptions about play, introducing a concept of ‘inflection’ as a way of showing how agentic responses in perennial forms of play during the pandemic helped to mitigate against ‘infection’ from troubling themes and events (Olusoga et al., 2024). Posthumanism provided a theoretical basis for exploring affective and agentic entanglements in children’s pandemic play which, together with work on children’s filmmaking, amounted to a challenge to the pervasive discourse of ‘learning loss’ which at times appeared to be the only framing of the impact on children (Cannon et al., 2023; Olusoga, 2024). In the world-building of dens in the home, of which there were many examples in the collection, we found corollaries with the imaginary world-building in the children’s filmmaking (Potter et al., 2024a) which further underlined how children’s experiences could be understood.

In addition to ongoing academic dissemination, there are lasting, tangible outputs from the Play Observatory project. There is an online exhibition¹ of instances of pandemic play, created with the Young V&A museum (Young V&A, Episod Studio, and Play Observatory 2022). There will be an open-access archive which can be used in several ways – for example, by researchers looking at spaces and cultures of play or exploring the agency of children in play in difficult times. They will allow explorations of specific concerns of today and the immediate future, in particular looking back at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on play. Each of these outcomes arises from a wish to bring the everyday experiences of children and young people to the fore in their own words as far as possible and in keeping with the spirit of the Opie enquiries into games and play in earlier times.

The value of play

Our child researchers in Playing the Archive needed little convincing about the importance of play, running out into the playground to explore and capture play experiences with voice recorders and wearable GoPro cameras, and responding to our questions and those of their peers. Similarly, the children we spoke to through the Play Observatory generously shared their playworlds, invited us (virtually) into their play spaces and created playful representations of their pandemic experiences in forms such as drawings and films. The children seemed to appreciate being acknowledged as the ‘play experts’ and were invested in play

as a worthwhile issue to explore as well as a significant part of their immediate day-to-day lives.

However, children's play does not always receive such careful and considered attention; often it is overlooked, dismissed or curtailed by adults, viewed as a childish phase to be outgrown or a distraction from more serious activities. Where it is valued, as the Opies noted, it may be with nostalgia for adults' own play experiences and exclusive of more contemporary play practices, part of an often-repeated lament that children no longer play as they used to (meaning, perhaps, in ways that look immediately familiar to their childhoods).

Despite these widespread challenges, the importance of play is emphasised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and reiterated in the UN General Comment on Article 31 in 2013:

Play and recreation are important to children's health and wellbeing. They promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy and physical, cognitive and emotional strength and skills. They are also a form of participation in everyday life, and are of intrinsic value to the child, purely in terms of the enjoyment and pleasure they afford.

However, the right to play is often considered only when other rights have been addressed (Cowan, 2020: 28), even when, in the UK and elsewhere, there is widespread concern about the reduction in time and space to play in school and community. Where play is supported and valued, it is often on adult terms and with adult outcomes in mind (for instance, learning through play or play therapy). While holding value for adults, and recognising play as a useful means of engaging children, such perspectives on play should not overshadow the intrinsic value of children's own 'free play' (Cowan, 2020). The Opies were particularly noteworthy in their recognition of play as part of children's culture, including what happened in the often-overlooked moments and spaces between other aspects of their daily lives. Both *Playing the Archive* and the *Play Observatory* attempt to reframe play's value in these terms, as closely as possible to children's terms. From such a perspective, play can be considered important meaning-making, a creative and significant way in which children make sense of the world around them (Potter and Cowan, 2020). In this sense, we hope we have contributed towards a reframing where play is valued for its intrinsic qualities, ever-evolving vitality, creative richness and significance to children themselves.

We recognise that children's play, particularly free play, may be under threat, particularly in certain situations and circumstances. This leads us to consider spaces and places in the world where there may be impacts of many kinds on play and a further need to diversify play research to take into account global issues such as migration and displacement, and natural and human-made disasters.

Diversifying the archive

The Opies were collecting games during different times and their emphasis in tracing those games went back into the history and traditions of the British Isles in their earlier comprehensive survey of the language and lore of schoolchildren (Opie and Opie, 1959). The Playing the Archive project led us to think of ways to diversify an archive of games in the future, to understand more about games from diverse traditions and cultures and to understand their place in children's play. Schools in the larger urban centres of the UK are very different from how they were in the 1950s, with their diverse populations and multiple hybrid cultures. We did attempt to unlock some of this during Playing the Archive and were partially successful. However, children in our project were particularly interested in explaining their use of contemporary media references and, perhaps inevitably, the dominant influence was popular culture derived from both broadcast and social media, including from popular music. Children generally needed more encouragement to open up about traditional games which they knew from home and family life which were part of different kinds of traditions.

There were exceptions and these suggest that further research in these areas is needed. In our interviews in school and those conducted in the playground by the child researchers, there were, for example, mentions of rhymes and games from South America, India, Bangladesh and Russia. In one instance, the ease with which children move between cultures and languages in their play was exemplified in a video clip from a London school which features a child reciting a rhyme with clapping from 'Arabic school'. Kate Cowan, the researcher, asks her about it and, while she is unclear about the full translation of the rhyme, she speaks the whole piece at some speed with great affective investment and interest and says it is about her community school. Almost immediately, on being tapped on the shoulder by another child, she joins another clapping game with a more Opie-like traditional background, very much moment-to-moment in the kaleidoscopic intensity of the playground (Opie, 1994).

A counterpoint to this work has arisen in a recent exploration of play and games from many cultures in the visual arts presented by the artist Francis Alÿs and his exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2022, *The Nature of the Game* (Alÿs, 2022b). In his installation, there were filmed examples of play from around the world, including the global south and majority world – for example, Mexico and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The videos displayed had some resonance with research in both *Playing the Archive* and the Play Observatory (see Potter, 2023), even though they were filmed and edited by adult professionals. They certainly reveal the centrality of games in children’s lives in very different circumstances and the universally kaleidoscopic intensity of the experiences. You can view examples on the artist’s website (Alÿs, 2022a).

Conclusion: the future of play research

Thinking about the research outlined in this volume, there are multiple directions in which the work on play could travel in the future. One important area for consideration, as noted, is that of broadening our understanding of diverse cultures of play through time, place and space. The schools in *Playing the Archive*, and our contributors in the Play Observatory, were highly diverse in cultural background, certainly by comparison with the respondents in the original Opie projects. We have seen above how we could go much further with our enquiries into games from other cultures and trace their similarities and differences, their movement between regions and countries. Future work should diversify and internationalise both the observatory and archival concepts and could build on the Play Observatory’s online methods to reach beyond the Opies’ UK focus. Given our findings to date about the survival of modes of play through the generations, can we also trace the survival of play experiences through travel and migration, by refugees for example? Can we explore the contribution of play to wellbeing in even the most difficult circumstances? How does the Circuit of Play function as a metaphor in such situations?

Play is often cited in both research and popular commentary as connected to wellbeing (Cowan, 2020), and we have certainly seen examples of this in our work in the Play Observatory during the pandemic (Cowan et al., 2021). This alone makes it important to keep play high on the research agenda and to resist any tendency to think of it as an unimportant or ephemeral activity. It is clear in key texts which theorise play (Opie, 1994; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Whitebread et al., 2017) and

from the research reflected on in this book that researching it unlocks aspects of lived experience like no other phenomenon. Everyone has played at some point, everyone has the right to play (United Nations, 1989) and play has intrinsic value. Play is a meaning-making activity that allows for the emergence of practices, identities and communities that are potentially transformative, and it is constantly constructed through action that derives from human agency. Play also has a further, affective component which links to identity development and wellbeing.

In studying play, and in particular in bringing attention to archives of play and play histories, we are seeking to understand it better and to assert access to it as a fundamental human right. For this reason alone, there is more to be done in the way of collecting everyday play, building on the approaches of the Opies and the play projects of recent years, not least because of how we could uncover so much about children's cultures and broader social practices, surfacing as far as possible the voices of the players themselves. Through such research, we can learn to appreciate the value of children's play repertoires as a living archive of their cultural lives, and to encourage the institutional archives of play into new forms of performative life.

Note

1 <https://playinthepandemic.play-observatory.com>.

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This book flies in the face of the narrative of decline which, in this field, states that children don't play any more. Only with patient and innovative research can we adults get near to what children are doing now, and compare it with the research and memories of the past. Call it anthropology, sociology, folklore or ethnography if you will, this book does all of this.

Michael Rosen, Goldsmiths, University of London

'Knock knock. Who's there? Opie. Opie who? Opie gives me my book back.'

Fans of children's play, children's folklore history, and the scholarly legacy of Iona and Peter Opie need this book in their library. I really do want my book back.

Anna Beresin, formerly of University of the Arts, Philadelphia

Playing the Archive: From the Opies to the digital playground reflects on a major study inspired by the work of citizen scholar folklorists Iona and Peter Opie. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Opies built a vast collection of children's street and playground games, stories, sayings, rhymes, beliefs and habits as told to them by children all over Britain.

This book proposes new ways of thinking about play and games, theorising on the workings of interfaces, repertoires and archives. It explores how the Opie Archive was made publicly available online by the project through innovative cataloguing and playful digital media interfaces, such as a red 'time telephone' kiosk at the Young V&A Museum. Chapters analyse new and old forms of play on today's playgrounds using state-of-the-art digital methods. This book also considers the Opies' ways of working, landscapes of play over time, and intergenerational dialogue about play. The collection presents research which speaks back to the often reductive public discourse around children's play and digital media, positioning children as creative, engaged agents in their play cultures.

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