# CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND GAMES AND SONGS IN THE NEW MEDIA AGE

## 2009-2011
## PROJECT REPORT

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# SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

This project, a collaboration between the Universities of London, Sheffield and East London with the British Library, aimed to develop our understanding of children's playground games and songs, building on the Opie collection at the British Library. It has added new material, developed a new archive, website, film and computer game prototype, and investigated the connections between the vernacular lore of the playground and children's media cultures in the digital age. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, under the Beyond Text programme (www. beyondtext.ac.uk), and has the support of Iona Opie and of Michael Rosen, the former Children's Laureate.

The project can claim to have met the aims of *Beyond Text* by developing significant new insights into the meaning and value of children's games: how they are played, learnt, passed on, researched, recorded, archived and exhibited in the age of new media. While the project builds on the pioneering work of the Opies, and re-presents their audio recordings for new and old audiences, it also extends and adds to the body of work which they and others have carried out over the last century. It carries the study of oral transmission into the cultural moment of the digital age, where the fluidity, performativity and inventiveness of playground games, the computer game console and the participatory internet co-exist and interpenetrate.

In terms of broader popular perceptions of children and play, the cultures of the playground and the street have always been objects of adult concern. Ever since children's games, songs, rhymes, rituals and objects of play were first documented in the mid-19th century, there have been concerns over their vulnerability to a succession of perceived threats. They have regularly featured as symptoms of what adults imagine as the innocence of childhood, and its supposed fragility. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, perceptions of the disappearance of children's games led to muscular efforts to revive them, including the teaching to children of the songs and games supposedly lost. Research since then has established beyond doubt, however, that this culture is much more robust than is often supposed; and the work of the Opies has been, perhaps, the most visible effort in making the case for this persistence of cultural tradition.

Nevertheless, in spite of the research evidence to the contrary, perceptions of disappearing play continue. Researchers often note the lament of teachers and parents that these games don't exist any more. In April 2006, the Daily Express carried the headline "Skipping? Hopscotch? Games are a mystery to the iPod generation". The article continued to report a research project conducted by the Sainsbury's supermarket chain, a poll of 2000 parents and families which purported to find that traditional games had entirely disappeared and children now ate crisps, played with technological gadgets and hung around shops. This perception can be seen as part of a wider popular anxiety about 'toxic childhood', which connect worries about health, sexuality and socialisation with obvious scapegoats, in particular changing cultures and technologies of media production and consumption (eg Palmer, S, 2007).

Needless to say, serious research in this field has usually discovered the opposite. Our own project, which includes a two-year ethnographic study of playgrounds in Sheffield and London, found that play was alive and well, more diverse in some respects than ever, and drawing on resources which had both a long historical lineage as well as ones from contemporary media cultures.

In the academic field, children's folklore has been an object of study for over 150 years, with researchers recognising playground games and clapping and skipping songs as important cultural texts. Collections enact a desire to preserve and protect traditional rhymes and games (Halliwell 1842/9; Gomme 1894/8) and emphasise the inventiveness and richness of an oral tradition sustained by children alone (Opie and Opie, 1959, 1969, 1985).

A notable theme of this research is what the Opies call the 'wear and repair during transmission' (1959). Studies note the interplay between historical continuities and the continual change through which playground lore responds to contemporary cultural preoccupations. Playground lore reflects 'continuity and change, stability and variation, dynamism and conservatism' (Bishop

and Curtis, 2001: 10). We have explored these paradoxes of oral culture, setting them against analogous forms of preservation and rapid change in the new media of the digital age.

Children's playground games have been investigated from various other perspectives: as forms of identity and socialisation (Allison, 1993); as linguistic patterns (Crystal, 1998); as informal literacies (Grugeon, 1988); as musical and compositional practice (Marsh, 2008); as forms of creative learning (Bishop and Curtis, 2001), and, of course, as play (Sutton-Smith, 1995). Our research has studied in particular how different semiotic modes are creatively combined: how music, ritualised symbolic movement, and linguistic patterning function for cultural purposes both inherited and reinvented. However, our team is multi-disciplinary, including specialisms in folklore and musico-ethnology, media and cultural studies, software design, history and sociolinguistics. This has given us the (perhaps unprecendented) opportunity to conduct a conversation about the phenomena of play from several different perspectives, applying different analytical and theoretical approaches. While we would not pretend to have produced some kind of ideal inter-disciplinary synthesis, we can at least claim to have made a sustained effort to attend to the many different aspects of playground culture that we have found, in ways that any one of these disciplines would have found impossible.

Whilst many studies value children's linguistic cultures, they often gloss over their aggressive, scatological, obscene and anti-authoritarian nature (Bauman, 1982). However, these elements are crucial in the 'making and unmaking' of playground lore, enacting the power relations of children's practices (Grugeon, 2001). We have explored transgressive, phantasmagorical play in children's creative and imaginative practices. Interestingly, there seems little evidence that these elements have grown more pronounced over time. Indeed, they are more evident in the unpublished material in the Opie archive than they are in the data from our ethnographic studies in today's playgrounds. It is not clear why this might be (and our studies cannot claim to be representative); but it is worth speculating on whether the understandable increase in the social regulation of playspaces for the protection of children has reduced the possibilities for such transgressive practices.

Importantly for our research, although many collections record the integration of popular cultural references (Elvis, Madonna, advertising jingles and soap operas) into games and songs, the evolving relation of playground lore to the media cultures of contemporary childhood has been under-researched. Instead, there has been a long-standing critique of the infiltration of popular and commercial culture in children's play (Elkind, 2006; Postman, 1983). However, the Opies found productive connections between the lore of the playground and the practices of children's media culture, although they made a qualitative distinction between the media-related resources and the more folkloric forms, seeing the former as more ephemeral. Our research suggests that such a distinction is not easy to maintain: some media references can have surprisingly long lives; while some apparently folkloric references can turn out to have media origins. In some cases, the media-related play is startlingly similar to instances the Opies found, the best example being performances of Abba by children in the 1970's in the Opie sound archive, and performances of Abba derived from *Mamma Mia* on the playgrounds of the 21st century. In other cases, there is evidence of a rich expansion of pretend play drawing on a wider media landscape, in particular, dramatic games which incorporate the structures, imagery and rule-systems of computer games.

Finally, collections of children's lore have not usually been intended for children themselves. Even ethnographic studies are subject to 'adultocentrism' (Bauman, 1982). Our project has enlisted the active help of children's panels in our two partner primary schools, and involved them in research, design, dissemination; and, importantly, in the curation of the British Library website produced as part of the project.

# SECTION 2: WHAT WE HAVE DONE

The project has five major outcomes. We will describe these reasonably succinctly for the purposes of this report.

### 2.1 The British Library digital archive

The digital archive (British Library research team) includes, as we originally planned, *The Opie Collection of Children's Games and Songs* (an analogue audio archive at the British Library), fully annotated and catalogued, and available as streamed audio to researchers worldwide (downloadable for UK HEIs) at ww.bl.uk/sounds.

The archive contains a good deal of material never published before, revealing some new themes: the more extreme scatological and taboo-busting songs and rhymes the Opies collected, the wide range of variations on 'classic' singing and other games; and the wide range of media influences that informed the culture of play.

We have also, as we originally aimed to do, added a wide variety of material from the ethnographic studies conducted during the project of playground games in two playgrounds, in Sheffield and London. This material represents perhaps the most sustained ethnographic investigation of playground play, including not only new games, songs and rhymes but also documentation of the wider contexts of play.

We have extended the archive beyond our original plans, however. A very productive aspect of the project has been our contact with other researchers in this field. Professor Kathryn Marsh, of the Sydney Conservatoire of Music, and author of *The Musical Playground* (Marsh, 2006) visited the UK to give a seminar and act as discussant for our Interim Conference at the London Knowledge Lab. She has subsequently generously donated her substantial archive of games and songs, collected from different countries (including the UK), to our archive. The British Library is also now in discussion with the independent researcher Dan Jones about acquiring his extensive archive; and with Michael Rosen, who also possesses his own archive of analogue recordings of games in London playgrounds.

Taken as a whole, then, this archive has exceeded our original aims, promising to become an important international hub of material for future researchers. It combines historical depth, from the 1970s to the present day, with international reach, including games from Australia, the UK, America, and Scandinavia.

### 2.1 Ethnographic study

The **ethnographic studies** (University of Sheffield; Institute of Education, University of London) have been conducted over the two years of the project in our two partner primary schools: Monteney Primary School in Sheffield and Christopher Hatton Primary School in London. The Sheffield school is located in a large public housing estate serving a primarily white, working class community. The London school is on the edge of Clerkenwell, close to the British Library, serving a multiethnic community.

The ethnographic study has in many ways extended the observation and recording of play to be found in the history of this field of study. It has recorded many instances of games, songs and rhymes recognisable as latter-day versions of the Opie 'canon', demonstrating continuity as well as change. Versions of many of the clapping games published in *The Singing Game* were found, as well as examples of counting-out rhymes, skipping games, chasing games and ball games. At the same time, it was clear that some genres had diminished: hopscotch, conkers and French skipping, for example (though reports of hopscotch were documented on the Sheffield playground).

Meanwhile, the study found many new instances of play, documenting in particular a rich variety of play informed by children's media cultures (computer games, reality TV, pop songs, musicals and films), and pretend play enacting scenarios which often intermingle domestic and fantasy settings: families, superheroes, fairies, witches and zombies.

At the same time, the ethnographers have worked to document the broader context of play, noting the settings (breaks, line-ups, lunchtimes), the built environment (tarmac, grass, play structures, walls, playground markings), and resources provided for play (skipping ropes, pom-poms, balls, hoops, planks, stilts). They have also noted the temporal progress of play – the dynamism but also boredom of lunch breaks, the effects of weather changes, the changing seasons, the effects of building works, and the coming and going of children with absence, leaving, moving, migration.

The studies have also conducted surveys of the children in the two schools, partly to get a sense of the favourite games of *all* the children (rather than just the ones who are filmed or interviewed); and partly to get a picture of the media cultures that lie beyond the playground, in children's media consumption at home.

The ethnographers have worked with panels of children during the project: effectively, the school councils, representing all the ages and classes in each school. The researchers' aim was to work with these panels as researchers, giving them Flip video cameras to record their own play and interview their fellow pupils. This approach recognizes that they are social actors who can play an active role in projects relating to their cultural worlds (eg James and Prout, 1990). This approach has proved successful, and the videos collected by the children have added substantially to those made by the researchers. The work of the children was displayed at our **Children's Conference**, held in Sheffield in February 2011 at the Showroom cinema. The day, hosted by the performance poet Ian MacMillan, included a series of workshops in which the children presented their research, and experimented with other aspects of the project to which they have contributed, such as the Game-Catcher and the British Library website (see below).

### 2.3 The website: *Playtimes: a century of children's playground games and rhymes*.

The website (British Library research team) was intended to display selections from the Opie archive alongside samples of play video-recorded during the ethnographic studies. In this way, we intended to represent the historical changes and continuities evident across the Opie collection and today's playgrounds. In fact, we have discovered new material during the project which has significantly enhanced the content of the website. Most importantly, we have collaborated with the Bodleian Library in Oxford, to whom the Opies donated their manuscript archive; and the Pitts Rivers museum, also in Oxford, which holds an important collection of the folklorist and photographer Father Damian Webb. The Bodleian collection provided valuable examples of written accounts of games sent by children and teachers to the Opies; while the Damian Webb collection provided examples of high-quality audio recordings from the mid-twentieth century, as well as strikingly beautiful black-and-white photographs of children at play.

The organisation of the website's content proved to be a valuable part of the research collaboration in its own right. Two examples will make the point effectively. One is the process by which the collection of material was categorised. The project team was well aware of earlier taxonomies, both in the work of the Opies themselves, and in later publications (eg Bishop & Curtis, 2000). However, a series of categories appropriate for the combination of historical and

contemporary material represented on the website needed to be developed, and the project team negotiated these categories over several months. The eventual list was:

- Clapping games
- Skipping Games
- Ball Games
- Games with Things
- Running Around
- Pretend Play
- Singing and Dancing
- Jokes and Rude Rhymes
- Counting-out rhymes

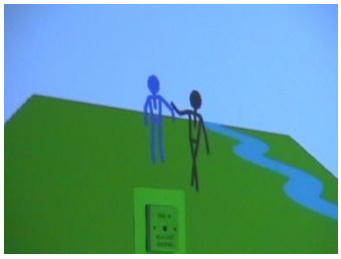
A second example of negotiation between researchers is the process which produced the to-camera pieces spoken by Michael Rosen, who kindly agreed to act as presenter for these introductions to the categories of play on the route through the site intended mainly for adults. The script for these pieces was contributed to by members of the research team, then edited in collaboration with Michael and with Steve Roud, the historian of folklore (Roud, 2010).

The design of the website has been an innovative process in library exhibition, in terms of the extensive consultation carried out with children in our partner schools. We have held workshops with the panels of children in the schools (essentially the school councils, representing all classes), and have involved them in three ways: as researchers, designers and curators. They have contributed significantly to the research and collection of their own games. They have contributed concept drawings for the visual design and navigational structure of the website. They have produced animations which introduce the nine categories of play in the children's route through the site, serving as a form of curatorial interpretation (see Potter, 2010, on children's curatorial practices). They incorporate historical information gathered by the children through interviews with Steve Roud; and with their own parents, as well as spoken comments on, and visual representations of, the contemporary forms of play they have found on their own playgrounds.

### 2.4 The Game-Catcher prototype

The 'Game Catcher' (University of East London) adapts the motion sensitive videogame controllers of the Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Kinect to create an application which allows the recording, playback, archiving and analysis of playground games in 3D.

This had two main aims. One was to develop a proof of concept of a system which would provide researchers in the arts and humanities with new and improved ways of archiving and analysing movement-based activities. The archiving of playground games currently relies upon video (or previously, as in the Opie and Webb collections, upon audio recording supplemented by still photographs). These provide an incomplete record – even video only records the events from a single viewpoint and can therefore leave details obscured or off-screen. The Game Catcher avoids these shortcomings by recording the position in 3D space of every joint. By recording the raw data, the movement can then be viewed from any angle and any distance and other alternative



forms of visualisation – for instance tracing the path taken by the hands throughout the entire game – also become possible.

In parallel with this, the Game Catcher had a second aim, which was to develop a new and innovative type of computer game. This exercise is partly intended as a form of cultural intervention. We have become too used to cordoning off these 'traditional' games and songs as if they represent some purer folkloric form of play, untainted by the commercial interests of the media, and placing them in opposition to electronic or computer games which embody a more modern and more sedentary form. By developing a computer game version of a playground clapping game, we were able to explore the tensions between these fields, as well as the areas for overlap and both actual and potential synergies (clapping games were chosen as they contain fast movement within a constrained physical space, thereby offering a suitable level of technical challenge).

Our intention in developing the Game Catcher, was to bring together these two aims so that the children would have a game which was enjoyable for them to play, and in playing it would produce plentiful recordings of movement data which be useful to researchers.

Children's panels from the project's partner schools were involved in testing a prototype version at the Children's Conference held in Sheffield.

The Game Catcher was developed with open source software and is written in the programming language, Processing. The development team will make the Game Catcher application available as an open source resource for future researchers and game-designers. The conference at the British Library is the first public demonstration of the full version.

### 2.5 The documentary film

The 50 minute documentary film *Ipi-dipi-dation, My Generation* (University of East London) draws on ethnographic and observational methods and provides a detailed overview of playground culture and the diversity and variety of forms of play in the two primary school playgrounds in London and Sheffield. In doing so it follows in the tradition of filming and photographing children's games, such as, *The Dusty Bluebells*, (the 1971 film of Belfast children's street games by David Hammond).

The documentary film, like the rest of our project, updates the picture, showing how children draw both on the long historical tradition of games passed from child to child, generation to generation; and also on the resources of their own contemporary media cultures. Like the website and the playground research, the film aims to give children's voices the dominant role in describing and interpreting their play.

The making of the documentary is influenced by ethnographic and anthropological film practices and the work of film makers like Frederick Wiseman, where the structure and narrative of the film emerges from the recorded material, rather than filming with a preconceived idea of storyline or result. The capture of activities of play is therefore mainly observational although a deliberate choice was also made not to hide the presence of the film maker – whose voice can be heard in the film. In line with the observational nature of the film and with the aim of communicating the ephemeral and sometimes chaotic nature of play, activities were filmed as they occurred - without staging.

Interviews were conducted to elicit children's explanations, views and opinions on their play and games and on the wider context in which these activities take place. It was decided that interviews in groups of children would provide more opportunity for interaction, debate and comment and that group interviews would also be less demanding for the participants (as foci and responses would be spread across the group).

The film maker was also keen to avoid the idealisation of children's play, and rather than using an adult voiceover, for instance, the documentary employs interviews with the children themselves (filmed over the course of two years) to provide commentary and interpretation. By doing this, it acknowledges the role of children as experts in their own culture, as well as their ability to speak at length and with insight about the topics with which they are familiar. Participants for interview were mainly selected by teachers or drawn from the children's panels, but also sometimes by the ethnographic researchers, by the film maker or by the children themselves.
In the language of film and the moving image, camera placement and height is meaningful. For instance, looking down onto someone from a higher position indicates a relationship of power. In filming the documentary, careful attention was paid where possible, to these relationships such as, for instance, the placement of the camera in terms of height and position, so that the subjects of the documentary (children) would be viewed as equivalent in height and size to the audience – thereby flattening out the power relations often inherent in the representation of children - whilst simultaneously reinforcing the idea of children as valid interlocutors of their own experience and culture.

Early edits of sections of the film, provisionally entitled *Ipi-dipi-dation, My Generation*, have been shown to parents of children at the two schools, and at the Children's Conference in Sheffield in February 2010. A 30 minute version is being premiered at the British Library conference on the 15th March.

# SECTION 3: WHAT WE HAVE FOUND - KEY THEMES

### 3.1 The Agency of Childhood

A perennial theme of public debates about play, echoed in academic discourse, is the agency of childhood. How much power do children actually have to create and control their own play? It is much easier to track the rhetorics of this debate than to determine how much power children might actually possess at any given time, in any given context. The rhetorics are marked for their violent pendulum swings, which one moment represents children as helpless innocents, the next as feral groups somehow beyond the reach of civil society. There is also a celebratory rhetoric, to be found both in accounts of vernacular play, where an apparently innate creativity is sometimes celebrated, and in contemporary accounts of children's media cultures, which sometimes propose an equally innate 'native' aptitude for the technologies of new media.

Our society's anxiety and confusion over the nature and changing state of childhood has been well-described by David Buckingham, who documents a range of adult fears: increases in violent crime, in divorce rates, in drug-taking, in suicides. While acknowledging that many of these fears are real, he also points to the contradictory nature of some of them, such as one commentator's concern that children's critical powers are too early awakened, while others lament a perceived decline in standards of literacy (Buckingham, 2000). Other fears have appeared more recently, in particular an anxiety about childhood obesity and the vulnerability of children to the influence of food advertising.

The evidence from our project cannot address such a wide range of social concerns. There is certainly evidence for the agency of childhood: the inventiveness of children in creating their own games out of a bewildering variety of resources is clear; the negotiation of social roles through play is clear; the irreverence, defiant irrationality, and energy of playground culture is clear. At the same time, it would be a sentimental overstatement to say that children are completely in control of their own play. Many of the resources they inherit, for example, come from adult culture, as the Opies and others have observed. Similarly, there is no clearcut division between the 'official' culture of school and the 'unofficial' culture of the playground. Rather, the playground seems to incorporate resources from the classroom (songs, dance routines, stories) in its eclectic mix. It may be more true to say, then, that children make their own play, but not always with resources of their own choosing, to echo Buckingham's own paraphrase of Marx's famous dictum (Buckingham, 2009).

The agency of children is further complicated by an apparent opposition between notions of childhood as a state of *being* between infancy and adolescence, and a state of *becoming*, whose condition is essentially developmental. From these two perspectives, their play can either be seen as a self-sufficient culture, serving functions similar to those of adult culture; or as a rehearsal for and preparation for adulthood. Our stance on this question is that the only sensible approach is to assume both are true. Informed by the work of the new sociologists of childhood in the last decades of the twentieth century (e.g. James, Jenks and Prout, 1998), we recognise that childhood is not separated from adulthood in a stark and distinct manner, but rather that there is much that is common across all stages of life. In this respect, it is not surprising that children draw extensively on adult culture in their play, as we have noted above.

More concretely, we can observe changes in the social spaces of play. A conspicuous difference between our observation of playgrounds and the material in the Opie collection is that we have focused on school playgrounds while the Opies' work includes material recorded in public playgrounds and housing estates. While we did not seek out play in other areas, the evidence seems to be that street play has declined considerably, and playgrounds, whether school or public, have increased in importance as sites for play. In general, then, sites for play over the last century have become increasingly urban, constrained, planned, regulated and overseen. The general motive for this is the protection of children, firstly, and the designed provision for play, secondly. These seem to be self-evidently good things: and indeed it is true that the playgrounds we observed were more imaginatively-planned spaces for play than the bare tarmac playgrounds observed by the Opies, or photographed by Damian Webb. The paradox, however, is that children's imaginative play thrives on unpromising contexts, on hidden nooks and crannies, on

secret codes and languages. Too much planning, provision, regulation, oversight may constrain rather than enable play.

The other great growth site for play which we have not observed directly is the bedroom. Children's media cultures are considerably richer than they were when the Opies' research was conducted, and our survey of the children in the two schools reveals extensive access to television, DVDs, radio, communication technologies, a variety of computer game consoles, and increasingly mobile phones.

Both contexts of play – physical outdoor play and media-based play – attract perennial adult concerns. The campaigners for children's singing games in the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century sought to document and reintroduce traditional games into schools, fearful that the twin dangers of industrialisation and urbanization were killing them off (Roud, 2010). Public debates about play in our own time also deplore the apparent decline of physical play, of the 'traditional' lore of the playground, and make media-based play the scapegoat. In fact, all the substantial research of the last fifty years into playground games, from the Opies onwards, shows that they are alive and well, and that they happily co-exist with media-based play, the two informing each other. Our research confirms this picture.

Finally, we need to consider how the voice of the child may be represented in society, and more particularly for our purpose in the institutions that oversee the conditions of and provision for play. Schools are arguably more visibly attentive to the voices and opinions of children as a general effect of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with initiatives in research and practice framed around notions of 'pupil voice'. Our project has sought to engage with this developing attention to children's agency in three ways, as noted earlier in this report: by working with student panels based on the School Councils in each school; by working with children as researchers; and by involving children in the processes of design and curation involved in the development of the *Playtimes* website.

### 3.2 Continuity, Change, and Transmission

Just as the Opies found many continuities between their collections and examples from earlier periods, we in turn have found that the principal genres of play encountered in our two schools are striking for their similarity to those the Opies documented. Thus, We have found singing games, clapping games, counting-out games, chasing games, skipping games, games with playthings , and so on. At the same time, it is clear that some games have declined – we found no evidence of marbles, conkers or French skipping, for example, and limited evidence of hopscotch. Although we should be wary of generalisations based on just two schools in comparison with the national scope of the Opies' survey, we have been fortunate to be able to triangulate our findings with those of a number of colleagues, especially Steve Roud in his recent book, *The Lore of the Playground*. With regard to clapping games, for example, we have found that much of the classic repertoire of the 1960s and '70s persists, –such as 'I went to a Chinese Restaurant', Under the Bram Bush, I Gave My Love an Apple, and 'A Sailor Went to Sea', although with interesting variations, such as the replacing of the first line of 'I Went to a Chinese Restaurant' with the more prosaic 'My Mummy Sent Me Shopping' at the Sheffield school. This example illustrates another trend, also found by Roud, towards the lengthening of clapping games by the combining of what were previously two 'standalone' songs, in this case 'Chinese Restaurant' with the movement routine designated 'Diana Dors' by the Opies. Nowadays the movie star in the latter is likely to be a contemporary pop singer, such as Katy Perry or Britney Spears, but, in one micro-variation, a group of girls consistently substituted the fictional, and defiant rather than glamorous, character of Tracy Beaker in this slot. The evidence from our two schools is that a number of new clapping games have entered the repertoire since the publication of the Opies' book, *The Singing Game* in 1985. One of these is Eeny-Meeny-Dessameeney, recorded on the Sheffield playground,. Nonetheless, analogues of this game were subsequently located both in the Opies' sound collection at the British Library and in their manuscript collection at the Bodleian. Another clapping game, 'Lemonade', recorded at the London school, is likewise absent from all the major published collections from the UK, but an analogue was found as a ball bouncing rhyme among

the unpublished materials of Father Damian Webb at the Pitt Rivers Museum. There is clearly much significant comparative evidence in these, and no doubt other, archives.

As other researchers have noted before us, the processes of transmission at work here involve the passing-on of games from older to younger children, between siblings and cousins, and in some cases from teachers and playworkers to children. These processes have sometimes been seen as an example of oral formulaic transmission, in which texts are not simply learnt and performed as whole entities, but as formulaic systems subject to extensive recombination, reworking, improvisation, and composition-in-performance (Marsh, 2008).

However, oral-formulaic theory has largely been applied to the transmission of linguistic texts. As some scholars have emphasised, the transmission of traditions of all kinds, including verbal forms, relies on customary example as well as oral transmission, for example in the transmission of performance style. One of the efforts of our project has been to recognise that the performative practices of the playground are made up as much of music, physical movement, gestural repertoires, and the imaginative use of found physical objects and environments as they are of language. Orality is *multimodal* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2000). A methodological challenge for our project, then, is to analyse the games we find across all the modes of signification they employ. How are gestures, dance routines, structures of embodied play developed, transmitted, learnt and adapted? Again, the example of clapping games is apropos here as there seems to have been a general increase in the repertoire of clapping patterns and associated gestures and moves since the 1960s and '70s, probably due to the influence of hip hop and other forms of Black American popular music.

The questions of continuity, change and transmission must also be extended beyond the local networks of families and schools to the global networks of the digital era. Indeed, a sense of global transmission is already present in the Opies' work, as they note the migration of a clapping game from England to an International school in Jerusalem; or the near-simultaneous appearance of a parody of the theme tune of the Davy Crockett radio series in the 1950s in both Wales and Australia. In the age of new media, further processes of global transmission appear. Children are learning songs and games from television shows, DVDs, and Youtube; while adult recreations of the games they remember from childhood are also to be found on Youtube. We have been able to study specific instances of children's engagements with these media as a source for their play and observe the differing ways in which children draw on their affordances.

Finally, we have observed analogies between the accounts of transmission deployed in folklore studies, typically applied to the folkloric forms emphasised in the Opies' work, and the accounts of the appropriation and transformation of media texts given in media studies. The latter describes the mash-up culture typical of the participatory internet, such as Youtube parodies, pastiches, remixes and spoofs (see Willett, 2009), or fan art, fiction and tribute sites (eg Jenkins, 2006; Ito et al, 2008). Both fields of study, though there are significant differences, emphasise the agency of ordinary people, processes of informal cultural production, the improvisatory and performative nature of these processes, and the hybridity of the outcomes. Rather than draw hard and fast lines between folkloric oral transmission and media-based mash-up cultures, then, it seems more productive to view these as overlapping domains of cultural practice.

### 3.3 The importance of media-based play

The Opies themselves were clear about the importance of media cultures as a resource for children's play, and documented the incorporation of advertising jingles, TV theme tunes, popular songs and other phenomena in clapping and skipping games, playground performances, and pretend play. Our investigation of the Opie sound archive has produced even greater evidence of the integration of media cultures with children's play than is represented in their publications. Examples include children performing songs by Gary Glitter, Lena Zavaroni and Abba, and referencing gameshows such as Larry Grayson's 'Shut That Door!' What is interesting about the extent of such material is not simply that Iona Opie found it, but that she took such care to record it, suggesting the importance she attributed to it as a legitimate aspect of playground culture, even if such material did not always survive into the publications.

In many ways, our project has demonstrated a continuation of this integration of play and media cultures. The question is, the, what might have changed? We are still seeing children performing songs by Abba, dance routines from musicals, and other adaptations of 'old' media. However, it is also clear that newer genres such as reality TV make their appearance in the playground - a game based on the Jeremy Kyle show in the Sheffield playground is a good example; while we have also documented children playing games based on Big Brother, X-Factor and Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. It is also clear that children's media cultures are richer and more diverse than at any time in the past, that the boundaries between children's and adult entertainment cultures are weaker, and they have more access to a wider range of media. DVDs form an important part of their culture; so where an imitation of a dance routine in the past might have been based on a memory of seeing a film at the cinema or on TV, now it can be repeatedly rehearsed to the DVD. Furthermore, despite the ubiquity of electronic media, older forms of media-related outputs remain attractive pastimes albeit updated to fit the contemporary media-scape. Thus, children still play with football cards (the popular Match Attax series); but also with Pokémon and other trading or gaming cards such as Yu-Gi-Oh.

Media-based play can also be seen, in our data, to combine with more 'socio-dramatic' forms of pretend play. An example seen on many occasions is the combination of playing families with playing superheroes, in which apparently naturalistic representations of parents, siblings, houses and bedrooms becomes infused with fantasy elements such as superheroes with magical powers, martial arts repertoires, and demonic possession. Such hybrid forms can be seen as evidence of children's enjoyment of toggling between roles which explore the micro-level power relations of domestic life and the inhabiting of role imbued with fantasies of power. They can also, however be seen as comparable to children's stories and films which combine depictions of domestic life with fantasy narratives. An obvious example, cited by the children here, is *The Incredibles.*

'New' media also make a difference. Perhaps the most important development here is the growth of computer games. We have documented several examples of playground games, especially in the category we have called 'pretend play', which adapt structures, rules and narratives from computer game play. It is not simply the case that playground games are imitations of computer game actions; rather, children adapt generic elements of them, such as stealth moves (in which an avatar becomes partly invisible to enemies); weapons (imaginary guns and light sabres have appeared, derived both from film and games); and technology (using tree-stumps as computer consoles on one playground, for example). Computer game characters and action also frequently feature in the playground repertoire and, like films and TV shows, commercial computer games provide children with narrative and character resources, ripe for modification and adaptation. However, computer games are also an interesting development for the simple reason that, being games, they also furnish ready-made 'ludic' resources such as rules and action-related narrative elements. For example, a version of Tig played in the London playground involved the characters Jack Frost (who could freeze you if he touched you), and Sally Sunshine (who could thaw you). In certain ways, these structures resemble the avatars of role-playing games, who may be equipped with attacking or healing powers.

Modern children are, then, immersed in an enveloping mediascape, which is impossible for them to ignore. However, our research indicates that playground culture and children's games are not overwhelmed, marginalised or threatened by the quantity and plurality of available media. We have seen that children make use of the cultural and media resources that surround them, and creatively manipulate them to their own ends. In the playground, children are still singing rhymes and songs that have come down through the decades, whilst sometimes bringing them up to date with references to the latest TV shows, soap opera characters and pop stars. Skipping games and clapping games are still popular, and hula-hoops have made a come-back. Cheerleading and other dance routines are in evidence, children citing influences as diverse as Michael Jackson and *High School Musical*. Make-believe games and old favorites such as Tig are staples of the primary school playground. Media is an undeniably important aspect of children's lives, but part of a wider repertoire of playground culture that also includes older games, songs and rhymes.

### 3.4 Trouble and Taboo

There is a long history of adult anxiety about the apparently violent character of some kinds of play. Most obviously, play that resembles fighting is often regarded as a problem: because it seems to involve immediate risk of injury to those involved; because it seems to blur into actual fighting and bullying; because it appears to transmits the habit of using violence to deal with problems; because it more generally legitimates the use of force; and sometimes because, as it is mostly played by boys, it sustains violence as a normal feature of masculinity. We know that this is not a new aspect of play; indeed, it may be one of the most archaic forms of play. Historically, we are able to say that combat-styled play has always featured on the playground, and the Opie archive contains many examples. We can also say that theorists of play have emphasised for many years the distinction between actual fighting and play fighting, both in animals and humans. The idea of a 'magic circle' which marks off play as make-believe, free from the consequences of 'real' life, was first proposed by Johannes Huizinga (Huizinga, 1945), and this distinction is used today by media scholars to consider the nature of play-fighting in certain genres of computer game.

However, the appearance of simulated combat in children's play is often seen as a new phenomenon, and violence in the media, especially in fictional form (films, TV shows, video games) is seen as contributing to a heightening of violence in children's play. The currency of political violence – terrorism – and of long-running wars has added to the view that it is the responsibility of education to counter the celebration or 'normalization' of violence in media fictions. In addition, the apparent rise in youth violence – notably stabbings and occasional shootings – has further contributed to anxiety that violence has become integral to the culture of many young people. In the school playground, it is very likely that play fighting will be interrupted, challenged, curtailed and sometimes stopped completely.

Given the anxieties identified above, this is hardly surprising. But the apparent violence of play fighting can be explained, as it is by those who participate in it, as 'pretend play'. Those who play at fighting are well aware that what they are doing is not real violence and does not hurt anyone. Children have their own version of Huizinga's 'magic circle' theory, and are well aware of the difference between play and reality. Moreover, where play fighting scenarios are allowed to unfold at length, the elaboration of narrative fantasies – rather than simply the mimicry of isolated acts of force – becomes more apparent. And, often, there is evidence that participants enjoy the sense of risk and threat involved in combative fantasies and construct games to heighten these intense but temporary emotions. Learning to deal with such emotions, to pretend play with others and to sustain sometimes quite complex narratives are all valuable aspects of play fighting.

More broadly, children's culture has always contained disturbing elements: depictions of death and mutilation, of the death or absence of parents, of abduction, malign magic and bogeymen , in in fairytales and folktales, in children's literature, and in the narratives of contemporary media, often adapted from literary or older stories. Again, these are often seen to have a developmental function in learning to come to terms with disturbing aspects of their actual world. They can, however, also be seen as thrillingly pleasurable in their own right, in the same way that adults enjoy their own version of such narratives. In this sense, as we have observed above, children are 'becoming' (teenagers, adults); but also 'being' – people with their own interests in phantasmagoric pleasures as well as more 'socio-dramatic' play.

Other taboos explored by children through play involve forbidden language, and troubling topics such as sex and death. The language of playground games is often unsentimental, witty, subversive of adult authority, and frank in its treatment of taboo subjects. Some of these are hair-raising, and examples collected by the Opies in playgrounds and streets are included in the digital archive of their work that we have developed as part of this project. Slightly less extreme examples are included in the 'Jokes and Rude Rhymes' section of the website. Interestingly, the ethnographic studies have uncovered rather less of this kind of material than the Opies found. This may simply be because our research was conducted in the well-regulated space of the school playground, whereas theirs looked farther afield. The historian Steve Roud presents rhymes

dealing with bodily functions, mutilation, sex and death as a perennial feature of playground culture, with examples presented up to the present day (Roud, 2010).

As with other aspects of playground culture, these games can be seen as a form of subversive pleasure in their own right, or as part of a developmental process. They seem to allow children deal with the more troubling aspects of their own and the adult world, precisely because they show how such difficult material is made safe, contained, subjected to the disarming effects of ribald laughter. It is the child's version of what the literary critic and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called 'carnival laughter': the response of mediaeval peasant festivals to the oppressive threats of church, state and mortality (Bakhtin, 1984).

### 3.5 Gendered play and games

A common assumption is that school playground activities are highly gendered –boys play football and girls play skipping games. Although we found that *some* boys frequently play particular games (football, imaginary action games), and that *some* girls dominate games such as skipping, clapping and hula hooping, there are important complications to these generalisations. On the whole, we found that a majority of boys and girls have a wide repertoire of activities with which they engage on the playground, and children's passive knowledge of games is significantly wider than games that are commonly observed being enacted on playgrounds. While there is evidence that boys and girls may gravitate towards certain forms of play, there is also evidence that boys and girls may play the same games, depending on circumstances. For example, clapping games, seen by many researchers to belong to girls, are frequently played by boys when in confined spaces or waiting situations, where more boisterous play or play requiring space or equipment (for example, ball games) is not possible. Thus boys may be found playing clapping games while waiting in lines prior to entering school or on bus trips. In some countries such as South Korea, the school day consists of short breaks between lessons, with an extended break only at lunchtime. Both boys and girls often play inside classrooms or adjacent corridors during the short breaks and games incorporating chanting, clapping, counting out and small-motor movements of hands and fingers, with a strong competitive element, are played by boys and girls alike.

Children's choices of what games to play at a particular time and place depend on a variety of factors – age, friendships, time limits, materials-to-hand, explicit and implicit rules and so on – as well as gender. Therefore, for example, it is common for schools to set aside a time during the week for girls to play football exclusively; and although a very small selection of girls frequently play football (with boys), it is not uncommon to see other girls on the football pitch (albeit drawn from a small group of friends). However, although this indicates that not only 'tomboys' and 'tomgirls' cross gender boundaries and play gender-stereotyped games, it is common to see stereotypes of gender and sexuality being enacted in playground games. For example, boys catch girls (and vice versa) is an activity we have observed most play times. Further, there are gendered ways of doing activities (boys playing clapping games but in a disruptive or ironic fashion, for example).

Where strong familial relationships continue in the playground, there may be play exchanges between boys and girls. There is often play between siblings at home and this may be reflected in the playground. In a school in the UK that had a large number of students with a Punjabi background, boys quite often entered the play groups of their sisters and demonstrated familiarity with Punjabi clapping and counting out games, even though their preferred playground activity was cricket.

In schools that incorporate "traditional" forms of play such as clapping and singing games into their curriculum or that actively promote these forms of play, the message that these games are acceptable to both boys and girls appears to result in a greater number of boys publicly joining in ring games, jumprope (skipping) and clapping games in the playground.

Another interesting, although complex, finding in relation to gender, is how activities may become less or differently gendered according to how children perceive the value or 'cultural

capital' of a play activity. It was apparent, from their insistence on performing clapping games for the camera, that children anticipated that the filmmaker was interested in their clapping game performance, probably due to their evaluation of the research project being interested in these games. At first it was only girls who pleaded to be filmed performing a clapping game. On returning to the playground a month later, it was interesting to note that some boys were now also playing clapping games. They played with the girls and in boys-only pairs, and they also demanded to be filmed. When questioned, they said they had learned the games from girls, and in particular from one older girl. Although further research is required, it would seem that these boys had decided that clapping games carried value (due to the attention received for this skill), and had decided to learn how to play - so as to also get some of the attention and obtain the same benefits as the girls who played. This would also seem to have interesting implications for the management of school playgrounds and for play policy - in terms of encouraging a broader gender spread over a wider variety of play activities.

### 3.6 The multicultural Playground

Globalisation and widespread migration mean that, for children in many schools, diversity is a feature of their social and auditory environment. This environmental diversity is used to creative advantage. Material for play is acquired from a variety of sources, then combined and manipulated using a wide range of strategies. Within the playground children may play games learnt at home or on visits to their own or parents' countries of origin and share games with friends, who thus acquire new games from cultures other than their own. These songs and games may be played within the confines of a small friendship group or may permeate the playground. Like any games they will be varied over time in the playground and may be combined with other games to form new repertoire.

Inter-ethnic transmission of games and game components seems to be facilitated by a number of factors.

- The first of these are the multi-ethnic constitution of friendship groups and the psychological safety provided by the friendship group. Where groups of friends have varying ethnicities, they may feel comfortable about sharing games within that friendship group, where there is acceptance and empathy.
- Another contributing factor is a high level of ethnic diversity, so that 'difference' becomes a norm. In schools with multi-ethnic populations, the dominant culture is less dominant and diverse social practices, including playground games, are more easily shared and accepted. The presence of dominant minority groups will also often result in ethnically-based play occurring in the playground. Where there is a small group of one ethnicity within a school with a dominant majority, inter-ethnic sharing of games is less likely to occur.
- The confidence and popularity of individual children will sometimes generate interest in games, which they play and confidently share with others of differing ethnicity.
- Children are also constantly interested in novelty. New games in different languages or with novel movements may generate interest on the part of other children. Where children recognise known game components in new manifestations, they may also immediately wish to join in the game, learning the new elements as the game proceeds.
- The lack of importance of semantic content (or meaning) of game texts also contributes to the ease of participation in games in the dominant language by children from other language backgrounds and to the adoption of game components from traditions utilising other languages into the canon of games in the playground for varying periods of time. However, the extent to which this occurs varies between different contexts, often depending on an established school climate of acceptance to flourish. Limited exposure to ethnic difference naturally also limits inter-ethnic exchange.

### 3.7 Archiving and Analysing Movement

The development of the Game Catcher has demonstrated that it is feasible to use videogame hardware to record the movements of clapping and other playground games as it provides a high degree of accuracy/fidelity, and performs at a sufficient framerate.

An iterative development process explored a variety of techniques before adopting an approach which combined both Wiimote and Kinect hardware. The infra red depth-based tracking provided by the Kinect is not affected by lighting conditions or clothing and as a result is highly suitable as a tracking system for use by researchers in the field.

By tracing the path taken by the hands throughout the entire game, the Game Catcher provides a "thumbnail" summary of the game – by comparing two of these images, it is possible to recognise clapping games which use similar clapping patterns, but different clapping rhymes (something which would be impossible using video). The movement data could, in theory, also be analysed automatically by computer to identify similar patterns or rhythms. Other possible forms of visualisation include creating Muybridge-like sequential images of an interesting or distinctive gesture within a clapping game (to illustrate an academic paper or presentation, for example).

The potential of this type of motion capture system in recording movement-based activity in arts and humanities research (and its strengths/weaknesses relative to other techniques of recording/analysing movement) is being explored further in a follow-on project "The theory, practice and art of movement capture and preservation: an interdisciplinary investigation" also funded by the AHRC Beyond Text Programme.

### 3.8 Recording, Modifying and Sharing Playground Games

As we had originally planned, the Game-Catcher can record the physical movements of game-play (the communicative mode least well documented in the literature) for analysis; and it can enable children to record their own games so that they can play them later against the computer, or their friends can play them.

In addition to the functionality of recording, analysing and archiving movement, the mapping of this latter function against cultural accounts of playground games and children's media-based play, as well as our own ethnographic research, suggested a number of foreseen and new possibilities. Children say, for instance, that they sometimes practise routines such as clapping alone at home, against a mirror or bedroom wall; the Game-Catcher would enable such practice. We know that games migrate, in the process of oral transmission, across sites, via families, for example. The Game-Catcher would enable more such transmission, and across greater distances, if stored games were transmitted online, for example. We also know that children can become separated from or isolated from their familiar contexts of play, though illness, families moving, and other reasons. Our exploration of the Opie archive produced, for example, an incident in which a girl who had moved to a new school was unable to convince her new playmates that her version of a singing game was authentic. The Game-Catcher offers the possibility both to remain connected with former play communities, and to rehearse the games of new ones. Finally, because this is a computer game, it transfers the games to a different context, with different cultural associations. It offers the chance to explore whether familiar patterns of social play change with this cultural switch.

### 3.7 Children as experts on play

The recording of many hours of playground activity and interviews for the documentary film, proved the extent to which children are knowledgeable and articulate on matters of their own experience. Although it is not possible to include all the recorded material, the film demonstrates that children explain and discuss their games, as well as the wider contexts in which these activities take place, with a high degree of sophistication and critical awareness. Finer points of rules or the status of games amongst a peer group are debated eagerly and with humour and self-awareness. Children, even the youngest, were also very clear on the boundaries between play and non-play – easily defining what was pretend and what was not. The vast majority of children were keen to be filmed and not at all camera-shy. In addition, children seemed to be very aware of how to present themselves to camera – for instance when asking to be recorded, children would position themselves in relation to what they considered the best angle for the camera. This indicates an awareness of the presentational and representational possibilities as well as the

language of visual media. The general lack of shyness in front of the camera is perhaps indicative of the ubiquitousness, within children's spheres, of moving image technology (domestic video cameras, mobile phones etc) and of user-generated content (You Tube, Vimeo, Flikr etc) – as well as an awareness of and aspiration towards, talent-shows such as X Factor, Britain's Got Talent and celebrity culture generally.

In discussing the differences between activities in and away from the playground for the documentary, it became apparent that for most children activities away from the playground are different to the games played in school break and lunch times with school-time play being a site of reception, transmission and sharing of the type of play culture much evidenced by the Opies, including more 'traditional' games, songs and rhymes. This would seem to have interesting implications for school play policies and funding, as the school playground seems key to the continuity and transmission of a more 'traditional' form of children's play culture.

Out-of-school street play is mentioned by one or two children, but has mostly disappeared in favour of supervised after-school clubs, activities (such as dance, football and music tuition) and play at home. A number of children also attend after-school language classes or schooling in their/their parents' culture (e.g. Chinese language classes, Jewish shule etc.) Home-based activities tend to take place within family structures or with only one or two friends and very often involve computers or television. A few children (mostly from the Sheffield school) played with a number of children in their street, but most children did not know any others in their street and therefore played mostly with siblings, friends from school or other connections, or with cousins of the same age. For those children with access to gardens (mostly from the Sheffield school), games and inventive play on the trampoline was a very popular activity.

# SECTION 4: CATEGORIES OF PLAY

*The following text is the script of the nine categories of play produced by the project for the organisation of the website, spoken by Michael Rosen. We include it here because it provides a rationale for these categories, as well as an indication of how the historical aspects of our project integrate with the contemporary view of today's playgrounds.*

### 4.1 CLAPPING GAMES

Clapping games are the big recent success story of the playground, and have exploded in popularity since the 1960s.
These games involve a combination of clapping hands with a partner while singing or chanting a rhyme. The 3-beat clap is the basis of many clapping games, and consists of clapping your partner's hands in an up-down movement, then clapping your partner's hands straight on, then clapping your own hands). But this basic clap is often extended into much more complex patterns. And it's often interspersed with movements and gestures associated with the words, like Eeny meeny dessameeny.
Part of the appeal of clapping games is often the challenge of chanting or singing while performing these difficult rhythms, and synchronising movements with other people, especially at the extraordinary speeds many children achieve.
Some clapping routines are seen as easier and others harder – A Sailor Went to Sea, sea, sea is often seen as a beginner's rhyme (though even here there are variations in how hard the accompanying clapping pattern can be. For instance whether the clapping echoes the triple repetition of the line endings: sea sea sea; chop chop chop; knee knee knee. Other games like 'Hi Lo Jackalo' or 'Double Double This This' may be seen as harder.
Clapping routines can be learnt from family, friends, out-of-school activities, on the media, and even on the Internet. *YouTube, for instance,* features a variety of children enacting favourite routines, but also adults nostalgically recalling and re-enacting their memories of clapping as a child.
The earliest clapping game in Europe – still well-known today - was probably the adult-and-child game, Pat-a-cake, which was first documented, according to the Opies, in 1698. Child-with-child clapping games aren't documented till the 1820s, when they were noted in France - references to them in Britain don't crop up till the late 19th century. Even then, evidence of clapping is patchy up to WW1 and almost non-existent from then until the 1960s when clapping games really took off among children, mainly girls.
While the pat-a-cake style clapping is still popular, there is a growing repertoire of clapping moves and more complicated routines of body percussion, some involving 12 or more beats before repeating.
Many of the most popular ones are sung to the same tune – the one used for A Sailor Went to Sea, sea, sea and I Went to a Chinese Restaurant. Some come from counting out rhymes, like Eeny meeny dessameeny, or previously did duty for ball bouncing or skipping, *like My boyfriend gave me an apple*. Some come from pop songs, such as *That's the Way I Like It* by KC and the Sunshine Band, 1975. Others were already circulating as rhymes and were picked up in pop songs which in turn made them even more popular, like The Clapping Song, recorded by Shirley Ellis in1965, and began: '3, 6, 9, the goose drank wine, the monkey chew tobacco on the streetcar line'. Like this song, many found in the UK have come over from America, especially from black American traditions and popular musics. The content of the words is often humorous and off-the-wall. Nonsense words which are just fun to say are common, and there are sometimes mild sexual innuendos, like 'When Susie Was a Teenager a teenager she was, and she went ooh, ah, I've lost my bra, left my knickers in my boyfriends car'; and 'My Name Is *Britney Spears*, I'm a movie star, I've got the curly wurly knickers and the see-through bra'.
These games are a link with the past – with the cultures of their parents and grandparents – though this is unlikely to be of particular interest to the children who play them, who often claim they've just made them up. They appeal in more immediate ways. They're a way of learning and demonstrating physical skills, and a way of playing with language, often humorously. They're a way of exploring daring themes, and the exciting prospect of teenage life just round the corner. And they're a way of announcing friendship: who gets included as well as who's excluded.

### 4.2 SKIPPING GAMES

The earliest references to skipping - from the 16th century - relate to skipping with a hoop, rather than a rope. In Britain, the earliest reference to rope skipping is to single skipping in the early 18th century. Skipping ropes have been manufactured for children since the 18th century, though of course improvisation plays its part in this history - washing lines were often used to make a long rope.
The two basic forms of skipping are single skipping with a short rope and group skipping with a long rope which were observed by Alison Uttley, enthusiastic chronicler of Victorian childhood. Clearly, these basic forms are still to be found today. As with clapping games, part of the appeal here is skill, demonstrated both by the complexity and variety of moves mastered, but also by speed. As the Opies memorably said, 'The expert skipper reminds one not of a fluttering butterfly but a machine gun'.
In long-rope skipping, there are different methods of turning the rope, e.g. varying the speed (often regulated by a chant such as 'Salt, mustard, vinegar, pepper', salt being the slowest and pepper the fastest) and doing the 'bumps' (in which the rope is whipped round so fast that it passes under the skipper's feet twice in one jump), often as the flourish at the end of a skipping chant or even at various points within a chant, e.g. on the letters of 'Mrs D, Mrs I, Mrs FFI, Mrs C, Mrs U, Mrs LTY'. Another method was to swing the rope from side to side rather than turn the rope, e.g. as in the initial part of the rhyme Bluebells, cockle shells, Eevy, ivy, over… (at which the rope begins to be turned over the skipper's head).
The other kind of skipping game to note is 'Elastics' or 'French skipping', played with a long continuous loop of elastic stretched around the legs of two 'enders' to form a rectangle. Elastics took root in Britain in the 1960s, brought from the USA and ultimately originating from China or Japan. This seems to come and go in intense crazes: it was widely documented in the 1980s and 90s internationally, and the Opies paint this picture of girls in London playgrounds: 'In playground all over London little girls could be seen with their heads bent over the fiddling task of joining a packet of elastic bands into a long loop, or going through the dance steps of the game, which is as dainty, and in some ways as skilful, as the Scottish sword-dance, and has a similar look' . In the more recent research in London and Sheffield playgrounds shown on this website, however, no examples of Elastics were found.
While the Opies recorded a wide variety of rhymes accompanying skipping games, the playgrounds researched for this website produced a smaller repertoire. Some were old favourites, such as 'Teddy Bear Teddy Bear turn around, Teddy bear Teddy Bear Touch the Ground', still found across Britain, and 'Cinderella dressed in yella' which has been in circulation at least since the 1960s.
Finally, as with any game involving physical objects, children display considerable inventiveness in using skipping ropes for other purposes, building them into pretend play to serve as snakes, reins for a horse, or other imaginative transformations.
So skipping games are still to be found in playgrounds, though they seem less prevalent than they were when the Opies were collecting them. This isn't to say that they won't be revived: playground games come and go in crazes and unpredictable waves of popularity, and skipping is no exception. While these patterns of popularity are, in the end, decided by children, some primary schools actively encourage skipping games, often because of their perceived health benefits.

### 4.3 Singing Games

Singing games were beloved of 19th century collectors, who often believed that they preserved evidence of ancient rituals. They were also seized on by those who imagine – and lament - a decline in children's 'traditional' games. Singing games have been revived a number of times, for instance in the late 19th and late 20th centuries, and nowadays tend to be taught by adults, whether in the playground, in singing lessons, in children's parties, or via children's television programmes.
The classic singing games were generally performed by girls, though boys sometimes joined in. There is a description of girls playing singing games in Flora Thompson's 1939 account of a rural childhood in Oxfordshire, *Lark Rise to Candleford.* Many involved circling whilst holding hands and had a courtship or marriage element. Some share features with country dancing and children's action songs.

Children draw on a wide range of songs, chants, dance and movement routines and games. Though the older singing games including 'Ring a ring a roses' and 'In and Out the Dusty Bluebells' form a part of this repertoire, they are mainly found among children in the first few years of primary school. As children grow older, more of their singing games can be traced to their media cultures, ranging from cheerleading, handshakes and pop song routines to elaborate restagings of routines from their favourite musicals.

The Opies recorded children performing songs of the pop stars of the day, from Lena Zavaroni to Abba; and we have recent examples of children using songs and dances from Beyonce, High School Musical and Mamma Mia. Singing popular songs in groups of two or more was already well known in the 1960s and it's a popular activity on today's playgrounds. Sometimes this is accompanied by dance moves either made up by the children themselves or, increasingly, copying routines seen in films, music videos or learnt in dance classes. Boys and girls both engage enthusiastically with this kind of play, girls often showing a preference for mainstream pop and boy bands while boys tend to follow street dance forms and male performers such as Michael Jackson and the dance group Diversity who won the TV show Britain's Got Talent in 2009.

A casual adult observer might suppose that children are simply mimicking routines they've seen in the media, but the picture's more complicated than that. They very often combine elements of dance, gesture, music and words from different sources, blending them into one routine. They may also learn these routines from each other, or from parents, siblings and cousins, rather than directly from the media. In some ways, then, media-based songs and dance can be passed in the same kind of way as a folksong or dance.

Like other playground games, song and dance routines involve considerable skill with movement, music and words, and can be a way for children to win admiration from their peers. At the same time, they can often be observed patiently teaching friends or younger children how to perform a certain dance sequence or song. Such activities clearly contribute to social development and the gradual building of identity; but they're also undertaken for all the reasons adults perform music, song and dance: for the sensory, aesthetic and intellectual interest involved, and the sheer pleasure of performance.

### 4.4 RUNNING AROUND GAMES

Running around is perennially popular among children, and it usually has some kind of structure or set of rules that define it as a game. In a densely populated space, such as the school playground, running around can be a skilled activity, involving weaving and avoiding (or not) people or objects.

Many running around games involve chasing, the best-known being the many forms of Tig, Touch or Tiggy, which children are continually adopting and reinventing, such as Tiggy Offground, Tiggy Hide and Seek, Tiggy Toilet, Stuck in the Mud, Tiggy Shadow. The Opies recorded a host of different names for Tig: tig, tag, tug, tick, dab, tap, he, ee, it, catch, catchy, catchers, chasers, chase, chasing, dobby, kip, nag, picka, picky, runabout-tig, skibbie.

Some running around games are played in particular places in the playground. In fact, children are endlessly inventive in adapting the opportunities of the built environment to chasing game scenarios, using black tarmac as poison pits, or platforms, poles doorways and tree-stumps as safe places. The Opies observed:

> "In chasing game a touch with the tip of the finger is enough to transform a player's part in the game. It is as if the chaser was evil, or magic, or diseased, and his touch was contagious. His touch can immobilise a player, or make hum clutch his body as if hurt, or put him out of the game. Simultaneously, it can free the chaser of his task, and enable him to be an ordinary player again".

The theme of contagion or poison, imparting a flavour of campfire horror to the basic chasing game, is perennially popular, found on the playgrounds in this project, and recorded elsewhere in Britain over many years: in Northumberland in 1890, and North London in 2009.

These variations on basic Tig belong to a wide range of chasing games which introduce dramatic, make-believe and narrative elements. In one of the playgrounds we researched an astonishing variety of characters appeared in their chasing games, including zombies, robots, monsters, witches, queens, pixies, unicorns and princesses. These had various properties for catching or protecting: one ingenious paring was Jack Frost – who freezes you when he catches you – and Sally Sunshine, who releases you!

Some more recent running around games draw on media influences, such as Mario Karts races, a playground racing game inspired by the popular Nintendo Wii title. Elsewhere, children have been observed roaming the playground operating rules which are clearly borrowed from computer games, such as stealth, where the child crouches low, invisible to imagined enemies, imitating the stealth mode available to avatars in popular first-person shooter games.
In some ways, running around games are games of physical competition. More generally, there are other kinds of game that can be described in this way. One example is 'thumb wars', which is like arm wrestling but using the thumb linked with the opponent's thumb in a fist. Another well-known example is handstand competitions, where the one who can stay on their hands the longest is the winner. In each of these cases, the competition is preceded by a chant, such as '1, 2,3 4, I declare a thumb war' - and 'I am the strongest, Not for the longest, Under, over, Pepsi Cola, Un deux trois' for handstands.
These examples all remind us that, while children are adept at acquiring resources for play, one of their most important and abiding resources is their own body. The body can produce dramatic characters, cryptic signs, strange faces, all kinds of sound as well as language. It can also be used in more novel ways, as nose-cracking, ear-wiggling, fake double-jointedness, armpit farts, Chinese burns, and a host of other bizarre actions testify. Jean-Paul Sartre once said that a child plays with his body to take inventory of its resources – and many physical and dramatic games seem to be doing exactly that.

**4.5 PLAYING WITH THINGS**

Play based around physical objects has always been an important aspect of the life of the playground. Adults may fondly remember objects they used for play, such as tops and hoops in pre-war Britain, or marbles, fivestones, jacks and conkers in the post-war decades. As the Opies put it:
"The youthful pleasure of prising a mahogany smooth chestnut from its prickly casing is not easily forgotten".
Marbles, rather differently, is one of the playground games with the most Ancient history, traceable back to second century Greece. The Opies record the rich variety of names for different kinds of marbles: Pop alleys, 'glassies', ballsers, dummocks, jaries, moral-leggers, bullies, bumpers, cannons, dobbers, gobbies, fighters, fobblers, kings, slamers, smashers, tattiemashers, yogies, babies, peas, pee wees, peedies, titchies or tiddlers, blood-allies, cat's eyes, coca-colas, pearles, rainbows, frenchies, spiders.
Other games involved designed structures, such as the hopscotch grid chalked by girls on pavements and playground tarmac. Many of these are not to be found in today's playgrounds, though it's quite possible that they may unpredictably revive as crazes.
If the actual objects of play go in and out of fashion, the deeper motives for playing with objects continue undiminished. Games involving throwing, catching, flicking, bouncing, and knocking down various objects can still be seen, even if the materials involved are different. Collecting is still a passion of children, and some of the objects of collection closely resemble those of the mid-twentieth century, such as trading cards based on football, like the Match Attax cards we observed on our playgrounds.
Many objects of play are brought into school by children: small and relatively inexpensive toys such as the manga-styled Bakugan toys, tiny animal figures, trading cards like Match Attax and Pokemon - and, occasionally, soft toys, perhaps with specific permission from a teacher.

However, it's also clear that many schools exclude some of the things that children play with at home. These may be such things as game consoles, large and expensive toys, dressing up clothes, toy weapons. While some of these are excluded for practical reasons, others may signal adult concerns about the narratives that lie behind certain classes of toy, weapons in particular. This raises questions for educators and playworkers. Combat-based games are often seen as representations of dangerous, anti-social behaviour to be discouraged. In fact, it's just as likely that they are a timeless and ineradicable part of childhood play, as they certainly are for adults.
Another frequent cause for concern is that many toys appear to represent a commercial culture. Yet commercial toys have a long history: and the football cards, marbles, jacks, spud guns and dolls fondly remembered by many adults were of course mass produced and sold in corner shops. Commercial toys can be traced back at least to 1744, and the children's books of John

Newbury. These were not only a considerable commercial success, but advertised Newbury's patent medicines – perhaps the first example of product placement! While children may be seen as vulnerable to the commercial world in certain ways, there is, however, plenty of evidence that they use commercial toys and other products inventively, sometimes subversively, to spin their own games, stories and dramas.
But if adults exclude certain objects of play, they also actively provide others. Hula hoops, skipping ropes, pogo sticks, pom poms, balls, wooden blocks, boxes and planks can be found on many playgrounds. All of these are used extensively and enthusiastically and often creatively – children display an extraordinary variety of ways to play with hula hoops, for example.

So what kinds of play with things have been observed on the twenty-first century playgrounds shown on this website? We've seen inventive play with some things not intended for such uses, including leaves and grass clippings, insects, researchers' bags, cycle helmets, wallets, mobile phones. We've also seen children use manufactured objects, natural materials and aspects of the built and natural environment in unconventional ways, often as part of pretend play, such as a pot stilt used as a stethoscope in a Mums and Babies game, and grass clippings collected together to make nests or beds.

### 4.6 PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is essentially dramatic. The banal is transformed into the fantastical: a puddle becomes an ocean; a stick becomes a sword. The improvisation of scenarios can be derived either from children's real experiences, or from fantasy themes. Make-believe play includes games such as 'families', 'schools' or doctors in which children enact daily routines. These can be transgressive too, featuring children who are perpetually naughty because they run away and get into mischief and, for instance in Mums and Dads and Babies, children who cry a lot. Rather differently, pretend play includes phantasmagoric narratives in which characters such as zombies, witches and fairies scream, chase, cast spells, catch and kill.
Fixed play equipment and physical aspects of the playground (and grass area if there is one) may be incorporated into pretend play, becoming, for example, a jail or the rigging of a ship, a doorway behind which to hide, or an animal's den. Games which involve lots of crawling may be played on the grass, and wooden play structures, brick walls, doors, dips, cracks, drainpipes, fences or gates can all play their part in the imaginative construction of a makebelieve scene. Children may also seek a particular area of the playground as a 'stage' for acting their dramas. While improvisations are sometimes solely for the benefit of the actors, they sometimes turn outwards towards an audience.
Pretend play is found among children of ***all*** ages at primary school . As they get older, it may become more subversive, it will draw on a wider range of media experiences, it will express more aspirations to adult roles, and it may feature emerging 'leaders' more markedly.
The media have an important role to play here, too, providing raw material for a wide range of narratives from movies, videogames, and TV. While it may seem, as with their performances of song and dance routines, that they are simply copying these sources, this is rarely the case. Instead, they transform, recombine and subvert in often surprising ways..
Some make-believe games draw specifically on children's experience of computer games, something that has been noted by researchers for at least ten years. Some examples we've found are children adapting stumps in the playground as magic consoles, waving imaginary game weapons such as light sabres, and playing mimed versions of first-person shooters.
Though computer games are sometimes blamed for a perceived decline in children's outdoor play, these examples show how imaginative games in the playground can build on them. In many ways, of all the media in children's media-filled world, computer games are the most similar to playground games of make-believe. They have strong, formulaic narratives which can easily be adapted and transformed, clear rule structures, and ageless scenarios – puzzles, quests, combat, fantasy monsters, magic worlds, and resources like maps, weapons, potions, and spells.
Why do children like make-believe play? They often say it's because they don't have to follow particular rules and they can make up anything, inventing their own events, characters and actions. It also gives them a chance to enjoy and display their shared knowledge of fantasy scenarios from film, television, computer games, comics and fairytales. Children, like adults, get respect and admiration for cultural knowledge.

### 4.7 COUNTING-OUT

Counting out is just one way children choose who is going to be 'it' or 'on'. It is part of a class of choosing games which are widely-known among people of all ages, the most famous of which may be Enny-Meeny-Miny-Mo, or paper, scissors, stone.
One of the most popular counting out rhymes is 'Black shoe, black shoe, change your black shoe' which involves counting out on feet, as the rhyme suggests. Another is 'Coconut, coconut, coconut, crack' or 'Banana, banana, banana, split', which involves counting out on firstly clasped hands, then fists.
Another is 'Ip dip do, the cat's got flu, the monkey's got chicken pox, And out goes you', which is played by pointing at each child, one by one. These rhymes take longer because they rely on elimination and so have to be finished before the identity of the 'it' is known.
Children often substitute nonsense words or words that fit the rhyme and rhythm, either because they are not sure of the words, or thanks to sheer inventiveness. They might, for instance, substitute other words in the same rhythmic mould for 'coconut crack', like Camp, Camp, Camp, Rock; or they might add words on, or take some out, or change words and words actions.
The role of 'it' is often less popular than that of being chased, so counting out is needed as a fair way of choosing somone - though they do sometimes just volunteer.
Fairness is always relative, however, and part of the culture of all games also involves cheating, so we sometimes see that children intentionally change the way they do the counting out to manipulate the outcome.

Although we may not see counting-out rhymes in the playground now as often as the Opies did, many children (particularly older ones) know several. They inherit these from a long tradition, which was well-documented throughout the nineteenth century in Britain, and still flourishes in playgrounds today.

### 4.8 JOKES AND RUDE RHYMES

Humour is an important component of children's play and nowhere is this more apparent than in their verbal play. It serves a wide range of purposes, allowing children to challenge, undermine and disarm adult power and seriousness, to explore taboo topics as various as sex or toilets, and to experiment with dazzling displays of verbal dexterity.
Many funny rhymes are ones which accompany specific games activities, such as counting out, clapping or skipping. Rude variations of Popeye the Sailorman, for example, accompanied clapping games in the mid-twentieth century. Others are simply performed and passed along for fun. Their humour, their 'cheek', their rhyme and rhythm, imagery, play on words, and frequent parodic traits are all reasons why they appeal to children and why they are memorable. Linguists make the point that such verbal play has a developmental function in sharpening children's linguistic skills. Nonsense rhymes in particular seem to provide ways for children to discover sound patterns through verbal play. But the pleasure of the moment seems more important: the opportunity to entertain, make friends laugh, poke fun at authority, venture into forbidden territory – even, less benignly, insult or stereotype.
An important class of verbal humour is parody. The history of children's language-play abounds in parodic versions of different genres: Christmas carols, pop songs, advertising jingles, Valentine's day rhymes, Happy Birthday, football chants, musicals, TV theme songs. The wide variety of genres involved demonstrates a real mixing-bowl of popular cultural references, where everything is up for grabs, nothing is sacred, and the punchline is all. The sources are equally diverse: other children, adults, comics, books, television, films and the internet.
The Opie audio collection, selections of which appear here, has a good many rude rhymes in particular, more than have appeared in today's well-regulated playgrounds, in fact. This may be partly because their collections include games and songs played in the street, in London council estates and parks as well as school playgrounds. In the changed geography of childhood, the street as a place for play has drastically diminished; while playgrounds tend to be more scrupulously overseen by teachers, learning assistants and playworkers. Either children produce less rude rhymes in these circumstances; or they keep it more carefully hidden.

### 4.9 BALL GAMES

Ball games are, of course, a test of skill and coordination in all playgrounds: but they are also part of a long cultural history. Games played by girls with one or two balls, sometimes against a wall, sometimes not, and accompanied by rhymes such as the popular "One, two, three a-leary" or "Oliver Twist, can you do this?' were collected across Britain throughout the twentieth century. These games, variously called Plainsies, Sevensies, Exercises and other names, seem to have largely disappeared from school playgrounds. Others, however, have taken their place, though these are played by boys and girls.

One popular game is Champ - also known as 'squares, scrubby' or 'four-square' - where players hit the ball with their hand into chalked squares on the playground. Other ball games and ball sports still current in the playground are Dodge ball, basket ball, cricket, and rounders.

But the most popular and enduring form of ball-game is football. Football has become the dominant ball game of many playgrounds and is frequently organised by adults, who may allocate different year groups to different days, or football only to be played on certain days or at a certain location. Football is perceived to be played mostly by boys - though not all boys play or even like to play football. Girls can and do play too, and are welcomed where they're seen as having a particular proficiency in the game. Children, again mostly boys, may also practise individual skills and tricks, like Spot, Headers & Volleys, Wembley, and Keepy Uppy.

Football has, perhaps, the most conspicuous cultural dimension, and many children will enthusiastically tell you which team they support, which player they idolise, which stadium they've visited, or aspire to visit. Again, it's worth remembering that not all children enjoy games of physical prowess. We came across one who had found an ingenious way around this, while still engaging with footballing culture, which was to improvise football commentaries on the playground in the style and tone of professional commentators, complete with imaginary microphone.

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# SECTION 6: APPENDICES

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## 3. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people and organisations have helped us. We would like to thank in particular:

- The staff and children of Christopher Hatton Primary School, Camden and Monteney Primary School, Sheffield
- Professor Kathryn Marsh
- Steve Roud
- Michael Rosen
- Anna Lobbenberg, British Library
- Bjørn Rune Lie (website illustrator)
- The Bodleian Library, Oxford

- The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
- Professor Evelyn Welch, Beyond Text director
- Ruth Hogarth, Beyond Text administrator
- The Arts and Humanities Research Council

## 4. PUBLICATIONS

### Books

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## 5. FOLLOWON PROJECTS

**"The theory, practice and art of movement capture and preservation: an interdisciplinary investigation" Grethe Mitchell (University of East London**) - AHRC

Drawing on findings from the development of the Game Catcher prototype, the potential of this type of motion capture system in recording movement-based activity in arts and humanities research (and its strengths/weaknesses relative to other techniques of recording/analysing movement) is being explored further in the AHRC Beyond Text follow-on project "The theory, practice and art of movement capture and preservation: an interdisciplinary investigation".

The 12 month follow-on project will produce an interdisciplinary review of theoretical and practical methods for capturing, analysing and archiving movement, drawing upon academic, creative and commercial sectors. The project will also convene interdisciplinary symposia for researchers, archivists, academics and the creative industry community on the theoretical, practical and ethical issues relating to the capture, visualisation and archiving of movement and gesture. An online research, knowledge-exchange and partnership hub, will be set up to foster further collaboration, discussion and dissemination internationally and beyond the duration of the project. A collection of selected research and case studies from the symposia will be published in book form.

**"Talkin' 'Bout My Generation": Rebekah Willett (Institute of Education, University of London) AHRC**

This project will develop an education pack to extend and explore the ways in which the British Library's Playtimes website can be used by different groups. The work will be conducted in partnership with a London primary school, with Age Exchange, Blackheath, and with the MA Children's Literature at Birkbeck College. The emphasis will be on inter-generational communication about play and games; and the work is intended to develop a sustained programme of contribution to and curatorship of the Playtimes site.