

PLAY AND FOLKLORE

formerly the Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter

August 1997
No 32

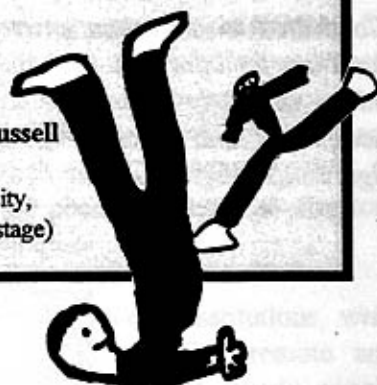
ISSN 1329-2463

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Two issues per year, published by the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, Clayton VIC 3168. Subscription: \$10.00 in Australia, \$14.00 outside Australia (including postage)

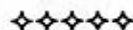


Dorothy Howard 1902-1996

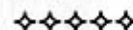
This photograph of Dr Dorothy Howard, was taken in Brisbane, Queensland, in 1954. The photographer is unknown.

NEWS AND NOTES.

New title, new format! After sixteen years, it seemed time for a change. We hope that subscribers both in Australia and overseas will approve, and that new readers will wish to subscribe. Special thanks to Margaret Spier and Carol Hinschen from the National Centre for Australian Studies for layout and to Monash Print Services for production.



Two important conferences are taking place in England within the next twelve months. ■ The *School Playgrounds Conference* is being held in Winchester UK from September 21-24, 1997. Further details may be obtained by writing to Learning through Landscapes, Research and Training Unit, PO Box 283, Elton, Peterborough, England or Fax +33 1 832 280002. ■ In April 1998, Sheffield UK will host *The State of Play: Perspectives on Children's Oral Culture*. We have reproduced the first flyer from the conference organisers in this issue of *Play and Folklore*.



Good news! Monash University's pioneering Graduate Diploma of Arts (Australian Folklife Studies) will continue in 1998 without upfront fees, although tertiary education in Australia continues to be under siege from the forces of economic irrationalism. A flyer calling for expressions of interest in the Graduate Diploma is enclosed. Efforts are also under way to place the Diploma on Open Learning together with another Australian university. Readers of *Play and Folklore* will be kept informed.

COMMUNICATING WITH STRING FIGURES

Barbara Poston-Anderson and Kristina Bathgate

Conducted in an urban environment in Australia, this study provides evidence that string figure-making functions for informants as a folk game. Most of the adults and children surveyed learned string figures from others in family settings or as a playground fad. Not only amusement, but competition, gaining social acceptance, and the challenge of developing new skills were given as reasons for learning how to make string figures. (Folk game, string figures, string figure making)



Kristy Cole - 'Cat's Whiskers'

Photo by Judy McKinty

Background

Accounts of anthropologists document that string figures, such as cat's cradle, have been collected from peoples in places as geographically distant as Alaska, Australia and Siberia (Elffers and Schuyt, 1979:18). There is evidence that traditionally the transfer of information through string designs made on the hands was closely interwoven with the mythology and history of a people. Images reproduced by this means were ideas and beliefs which had social 'importance' to the group (Jayne, 1962:3). As a result, the string figure was a powerful medium for the passing of lore from one generation to the next.

However, in technological societies other media (eg. television, newspapers) have overtaken the string figure as ways by which culturally significant information is disseminated. Even so, when asked, many people still know how to make string figures. This raises the question: what meaning does string figure-making have today?

This study aimed to investigate this question by discovering how string figures function for selected individuals within the contemporary Australian context. Key questions were:

- What are the string figures still remembered and made?
- How did individuals learn the string figures and in what situations?
- Did individuals teach the string figures to others: to whom and in what situations?
- What meaning did the string figures have for the respondents at the time of learning or sharing?

This project is significant because apart from anthropological records and current game books for children, string figures have not had extensive study in Australia. There has been no attempt in recent times to collect and document the range of figures which is known nor to identify the situations in which these figures are shared. Providing written and visual documentation of string figures known by individuals living in Australia is useful because it preserves a record of the object itself and its range of meanings at a certain point in time. Such documentation provides a valuable resource for those who study cultural information and folklore.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample was obtained by means of a snowball technique with the aim of reaching 'information-rich key informants' (Patton, 1980:176). This strategy proved satisfactory for obtaining adult respondents because the researchers were able to get 'introductions' to new informants through their friends. This informal approach was more successful than initial contacts made to retirement villages by phone and letter to directors and occupational therapists.

The way in which these institutions were approached was too official, remote and impersonal. The groups of elderly people contacted by this means were reported by the management to have said either that they could not remember how to make specific string figures or that they had little interest in the project, regarding the making of string figures as a 'childish' activity not worthy of research.

Such devaluation by adults of childhood experience is a well documented phenomenon. One explanation is that in societies driven by the 'work ethic, rationality, and science,' there is an inbuilt bias against 'expressive forms' such as string figures which are associated with 'play'. As a result, a 'triviality barrier' arises which prevents such areas being perceived as worthwhile for in-depth study even though they may provide a useful cultural record (Sutton-Smith, 1970:5).

After the pilot study, in which all of the respondents interviewed associated string figures with childhood experiences, the researchers decided to expand the sample to include some children as well as adults. This seemed reasonable since the childhood years were shown to be the important ones for string figure making. All children interviewed attended a public primary school in a north western Sydney suburb. The students were initially identified by means of the teacher librarian through a string figure competition. Then permission was received from children identified as knowing string figures and from their parents for them to take part in the study.

The resultant sample for the study consisted of 26 primary school children, aged 6 to 11, and 17 adults, aged 18 to 87. All informants lived within Sydney and its suburbs. Because of the confidentiality guaranteed informants, responses are identified in this article by interview number only and not by name. Interviews [1]-[26] were with children; interviews [27]-[43] were with adults.

Data Collection

Each participant who could make string figures was interviewed to identify: the names of the string figures; source of the figures (ie. from whom they were learned and in what situations); transmission (ie. to whom they were taught and in what situations); and what meaning the figure had for them at the time. The interviews were audiotaped and the process of making each string figure was videotaped. This documentation served as a record for later reference during data analysis.

In addition to broadening the sample, the pilot study carried out with four adults respondents helped to refine the interview procedures. Because most people learned the string figures they knew from the same person/s in the same situation/s, the questions about the situation became redundant. As a result, questions for the interview were modified to enable a less rigid interview structure. Participants were encouraged to talk about the string figures they knew, how they learned them and if they shared them with others. They were prompted by such questions as: 'Can you tell me more about that?' and 'Is that all you want to say about that?'

Findings

There was a difference in how the children and the adults responded to the interview. The children focused on demonstrating that they

could make the figures. This may have been because they were identified for the sample by means of a string figure competition. When responding to questions, most gave short answers. Engaging them in extended conversations was difficult.

On the other hand, the adults were more expansive in their responses. For many, doing string figures led them to recall associated childhood memories (eg. for several the war years in Greece and England; for others family times at home or happy hours on the playground at school with friends).

Another aspect of memory which was stimulated by the string was tactile memory. This was particularly apparent with the adult informants. Although a number of them said they could not make any figures when they first held the string, they often remembered patterns they thought they had forgotten. As one adult put it, 'the fingers seem to do it automatically. There seems to be a habit. I don't remember but I don't have to think about it' [15]. Another said, 'I like the satisfaction of feeling your fingers doing things without being controlled by your mind' [34].

String figures were found to be known by people who were raised in a number of different countries. In our sample, adults who now live in Australia, but had grown up in Chile, England, Greece, New Zealand, and South Africa, all reported doing string figures as children.

Table 1 names each of the string figures and its frequency as demonstrated by the children and adults. The breakdown of figures shows that 36 unique figures were made, some having more than one name (eg. *mouse trap* was also called *cutting the hand*).

Table 1 String Figures by Name and Frequency

STRING NAME	FIGURE	Child	Adult	Total
bed		--	1	1
<u>bowtie</u>		1	--	1
bridge (Harbour, London)		14	7	21
broom		1	1	2
butterfly		--	1	1
cat's cradle+		7	11	18
<u>cat's ears</u>		1	--	1
<u>cat's face</u>		1	--	1
cat's whiskers		12	4	16
<u>chair</u>		1	--	1
<u>chef's hat</u>		1	--	1
cup and saucer		15	8	23
double parachute		10	--	10
gate (a.k.a. baby's cradle)		2	--	2
ironing board		5	1	6
jail		1	--	1
Jamaican flag		1	--	1
<u>little girl</u>		1	--	1
magic trick		--	1	1
mouse trap (a.k.a. cutting the hand)		5	1	6
owl's eyes		1	--	1
pants on the line+ (a.k.a. old man's trousers)		5	1	6
parachute		13	3	16
<u>parachute no. 2</u>		1	--	1
person shape		--	1	1
queen's crown		5	2	7
sailing ship		1	--	1
see saw+		1	--	1
spear		1	--	1
star		2	--	2
teacup with twist		--	1	1
<u>telephone</u>		1	--	1
tower (Eiffel, Centrepont)		11	3	14
<u>weird one</u>		1	--	1
witch's hat		8	2	10
witch's keys		2	1	3
Total		132	50	182

Overall the researchers saw 182 string figures demonstrated with adults providing a total of 50 and children providing 132. The children were the only ones to demonstrate figures which they said they created themselves (eg. 'This is one I made up myself' [6]). These 'original' figures are the ones underlined in the table.

Table 1 shows that the most demonstrated figures by both adults and children were: the *Harbour Bridge*, *cat's cradle*, and *cup and saucer*. Also popular among children were the *Eiffel Tower*, *cat's whiskers*, *parachute*, *double parachute* and *witch's hat*.

Most figures were said to have their names because they 'looked like' the things they represented (eg. *cat's whiskers*, *queen's crown*). The exceptions were the tricks which were often called 'magical' (eg. *cutting the hand*). Nearly all the figures had generic names. The exceptions were: the *Harbour Bridge* (also called the *London Bridge* by one informant), the *Eiffel Tower* (also called *Centrepont Tower* by one respondent), and the *Jamaican flag*.

String figures were of two basic types: those done alone and those done with others (+). In the category of those done with others was the traditional cat's cradle, a series of figures (eg. *soldier's bed*, *manger*, *diamond*, *cat's eye*) passed back and forth between two or more children. Others included the *old man's pants*, where a second person pulls down the *Harbour Bridge* figure to make a set of braces. Another is the *cutting the hand* trick, also called the *mousetrap*, where a person's arm is trapped by the string and then released. The *see saw* figure sways the string back and forth between two children.

Table 2 provides a list of the sources of string figures which were identified. Often informants named more than one source for the figures they knew.

Table 2 How the informants learned the string figures

SOURCE	Child	Adult	Total
adult	1	1	2
friend/neighbour			
aunt	--	1	1
book	1	2	3
cousin	--	1	1
dad	3	1	4
friends at school	4	10	14
grandma	2	1	3
grandpa	1	--	1
mum	16	4	20
sister	3	--	3
Total	31	21	52

With three exceptions the informants indicated that they had learned the string figures from other people. The most frequent source for children was mum, while adults most frequently said they learned figures from their friends at school. The only boy in the study (year 1), however, said that he and his mother learned the figures from a book. Two adults also mentioned books as sources for string figures.

The playground was mentioned most often as the place where string figure making occurred. One adult specifically recalled 'the playground on a hot summer's day, not wanting to run around too much' and the string figures 'keeping your hands busy'[36].

Other situations in which string figure making happened were:

- 'practising string figures under the desk (at school)' [28]

- 'occupying your mind on the bus journey home' [28]
- 'quiet times at home' [32]
- 'a winter game you could play inside' [35]
- 'when we were at home and it was raining' [41]
- 'we do it instead of watching TV' [20]
- 'Mum taught me when we were on a cruise' [8]

Eighteen of the informants indicated that they taught others the string figures they knew. In a number of cases they taught more than one other person. Those whom the informants said they taught are listed in Table 3.

Table 3 To whom the informants taught string figures

INFORMANTS TAUGHT	Child	Adult	Total
brothers	--	1	1
children in class	--	1	1
other family's children	--	1	1
own children	--	1	1
daughters	--	5	5
sons	--	4	4
cousins	2	--	2
friends	9	1	10
girls next door	--	1	1
grandchildren	--	1	1
mum	1	1	2
sister	2	2	4
Total	14	19	33

Adult informants primarily taught their own children or grandchildren (11 of 18 responses), while children, as might be expected, usually taught their friends (9 out of 14 responses).

Discussion

When assessing how string figures function in the Australian urban context, the evidence from this study supports the classification of this phenomenon as a 'folk game' (Steinfest, 1992). Gaming characteristics of string figures include the competition (eg. to see who could do the figures the 'quickest' or with eyes closed [29]), the challenge (eg. making progressively more difficult figures or inventing new ones [28]) and the skill (eg. 'It was a skill which was good to master' [27]).

As a medium, string figures also have the common folkloric feature of having been passed on to others through direct transmission. Several of the adults, in particular, commented on this process: 'it was a thing that was passed down from grandmother to mother (and to me)' [7], and 'I enjoyed the history of being taught by an older person and passing it down' [11].

Not only were some of the string figures in this study passed down from one generation to the next, but some were shared across one generation. As a playground 'fad', string figures were swapped and shared by children with each other. One adult remembered string figures as being 'like the marble craze which we let go after awhile' [28]. Some informants reported an interplay in which they learned figures at home, swapped them at school, and then returned home to share what they had learned on the playground [32].

As a folk game, string figures fulfilled several key functions for the informants. First, both the children and the adults indicated that string figures were fun to make and that they were done for amusement either to entertain oneself or friends (eg. 'String figures are fun. It catches on and you can make up your own' [3]). 'Amusement' has been identified as an important folklore function (Dundes, 1965: 290).

For many, making string figures also provided group commonality through a shared activity (eg. 'We roamed in packs with our strings' [28]). To succeed at string figure making was to be an

accepted group member (eg. 'If you could [do string figures], you belonged in that group' [29]).

However, informants suggested that within groups hierarchies of skills developed. There was 'peer pressure' [8] (eg. 'You had to learn all the tricks with string if you wanted to keep up with the other girls at school' [6]). There were also 'power' struggles (eg. 'There was a power play to be the team leader who could do the figures best' [28]). Becoming expert at string figures also was a way to enhance status outside your own peer group (eg. 'This was a way to play with the bigger girls' [34]).

On the other hand, to be inept at making string figures could mean losing friends (eg. 'They wouldn't play with you' [34]), becoming an outsider (eg. 'You didn't fit in' [34]), and a personal identity crisis (eg. 'It was almost as if you failed at being a girl' [34]). The impact that this had on one adult was apparent even years later as she lamented her lack of expertise: 'I wished I was better at it and could do more' [15].

Although part of child's play, the making of string figures for some informants took on a 'magical' and 'ritualistic' significance. One adult said that creating 'magic shapes' with string gave him 'a certain sense of power' as a child [28]. Another adult reported that string figure making was 'like a ritual' because the figures were done consistently over the years with the same people [29].

There is even a sense in which string figure-making may be thought of as 'antithetical', that is, 'carried out as a reaction against an official order of meanings, uses and processes' (Mechling, 1992: 97). For some, playing with string was a 'child only' activity, described by one adult as 'a child's pastime' [27] and more emphatically by another as an activity in which 'adults were not included' [29]. This same person emphasised that 'there was an element of secrecy even though string figures were done in the open. When someone came you put the figure down or let it go' [29].

One of the most unexpected outcomes of the project was the discovery that the child informants invented string figures of their own. Figures said by the children to be their own creations which they made by 'fiddling around' with the string included the *telephone, chair, cat's ears, and cat's face*.

One adult also remembered as a child the thrill of 'creating new things that looked like the things around us' on the bus ride home from school [28]. This same adult, however, emphasised that there was a certain procedure you had to follow to be successful (eg. 'You had a structure and if you didn't follow it you couldn't make the figures' [28]). This view supports Mechling's contention that in childlore there is a pull between conservatism (ie. the need to remain within the rules) and dynamism (ie. the need to invent) (1992:109).

Another finding worth mentioning is that the responses of the informants revealed that most children made string figures within gender groups rather than across genders. Many of the women/girls who were interviewed said they thought making string figures was a girls' only activity. Girls said they thought boys would think that making string figures was 'not cool' [6] or 'nerdy' [3].

However, the evidence does not support the claim that string figure making is only a girls' activity. After the interviews were conducted with the children at the school (all were girls except a boy in year one), several older boys unofficially demonstrated string figures for the researchers. Several of these were ones not previously recorded (eg. the *rocket, cutting off the head*). These boys had not identified themselves as knowing string figures by means of the 'competition' so they were not included in the official sample. Yet it was obvious that they were expert in string figure making.

Also, in the sample the one adult male was adept at string figure-making and remembers making figures with his group at school. In his case the girls were excluded. In fact, he specifically remembers that

when he taught his girl-friend, the other boys reacted unfavourably (ie. 'My mates resented the fact' [28]).

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that a more in-depth investigation of the string figure within the Australian context would be worthwhile. The findings suggest that string figure-making is largely associated with childhood. For adults this activity provides a stimulus for childhood memories, while for children who know how to make them, string figures are an amusing playground pastime. The study also supports the classification of string figure-making today as a 'folk game' rather than as an essential part of the cultural myth-making process as it once was. Nonetheless, string figures remain part of traditional lore because, as this research demonstrates, they rely on direct transmission either across or between generations for their dissemination.

However, there is a need to extend the current investigation to include a wider sample. For example, by including more males a clearer assessment could be made about the extent to which string figure making is gender specific. Likewise, the inclusion of individuals from groups known for their skill in string figure-making (eg. Aboriginal informants) is likely to broaden both the number and the type of string figures reported.

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Research for this article was made possible through the Summer Scholar Program, 1994-95, at the University of Technology, Sydney.

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LETTERS

Ainslie ACT 2602

5 Jan 1977

Dear Gwenda,

Happy new year! I don't know if the following rhymes are already in your collection (obviously, on the probabilities, they are) but in case they're not, I obtained them on 20 December from Connell Monaghan aged 9, a pupil in Grade 3H at Chapman Primary School in the ACT.

Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells,
Santa Claus is dead.
Rudolph got a 44
And shot him in the head.

Barbie Doll, Barbie Doll,
Tried to save his life.
Action Man from Notre Dame
Stabbed him with his knife.

Q. What do you call a smelly Santa?

A. Farther Christmas.

Keith McKenry

Hamilton, Vic 3300
10/9/96

Dr June Factor,

We were very interested in your recent talk on the ABC, and it revived memories of our school days.

We are 86 years of age and my husband went to a very small country school in a 'wool' area of the Grampians. Their favorite game was 'Sheep, sheep come home' which they played on the local tennis court.

The shepherd stood at one end of the court, the sheep the other, and the wolf at the net.

The shepherd called 'Sheep, sheep, come home, they replied, 'Can't, we're afraid'. Shepherd: 'What of'. Sheep: 'The Wolf'. Shepherd: 'He has gone to Penshurst and won't be home for 7 days'.

They then tried to get over to the shepherd, and that went on till the wolf gradually caught them all. Our 47-yr-old daughter went to the same little school till High School years, and they were still playing that game.

I went to school in Geelong, and we were not interested in sheep.

Wishing you all the best for your research.

Yours faithfully, **Thelma L McArthur**

Swan Hill, 3585

Warwick, Qld 4370

Dear Dr Factor,

A few of my childhood memories. I am nearly 83 years old and went to school in Warwick Queensland. One of our favourite games was 'beams'. The shelter sheds had big beams across the inside of the tin roof. One child would stand on each side and throw a ball at the beam. We usually played 100 up. Miss the beam and the other had a go. It made you throw straight; a skill I have never lost. We also played jacks, but I could never beat my mother, hop scotch, french skipping, using two ropes, turned together in opposite directions,

1, 2, 3

Mother caught a flea
She washed it, squashed it
And put it in the tea.
The flea jumped out
Mother gave a shout
And Father raced in
With his shirt tail hanging out.

If someone said something we didn't believe we would say 'Mulley grubs'. Another game was called 'Sheep, wolf & shepherd'.

Sorry, but I have to try & write by memory, as I have distorted eyesight.

Yours sincerely, *Allie Evans*

23 November 1996

Dear Gwenda,

Thanks for the 'double-issue' of the Newsletter. Hadn't realised 'knucklebones' was such a popular game in this country, certainly it never entered my experience as a child either in the country (at Caboolture State School) or in Brisbane, 20s and 30s. Certainly we played 'tip-cat', marbles, kites etc. but had never heard of knucklebones! Perhaps it was regional to those schools where the tradition existed and survived. We did play a lot of role-playing games, (Robin Hood with quarterstaves, bushies and bobbies, a kind of cowboys and Indians lookalike and pirates) but never knucklebones. Was fascinating to read just how widespread it was. Have never encountered it at all personally.

Chief reason for writing, though, is to say how delighted I am that at last a tertiary institution is establishing a Diploma course in folk studies. Am glad that has happened here before I go to join the great majority ...

Bill Scott

S U B S C R I B E N O W
s u b s c r i p t i o n f o r m e n c l o s e d

COMPUTER GAMES OR GAMES ON COMPUTER?

Judy McKinty

"Wanna play?"

"Yeah."

"It's keeps."

"How many dubs?"

"Four."

"Alright. No fudging, no clears, grab doogs and run."

"Alright. You drizzy first."

Years ago, a conversation like this might have been heard in school playgrounds all over Australia. It's the beginning of a Marbles game which will last until the school bell rings, when players will 'grab doogs and run' - snatch up as many marbles as they can and race indoors. The language of Marbles is as fascinating as the game, and terms like 'taw', 'bloodsucker', 'cat's eye' and 'knuckle down' linger in the memory long after the players have been forgotten. And if you hand a bag of marbles to an ordinary, everyday adult, chances are his eyes will begin to sparkle, and before long he'll be down on the floor muttering strange words and showing you the special flick he used when he was a boy.

What is it about Marbles that causes such a reaction in adults? Why is a game which has been around for over 6000 years still one of the most popular games in the playground? Is it the feel of a handful of smooth, shiny, glass marbles, or the sound of the 'click' they make as they strike together, or is it the memories conjured up by the tangible evidence of our childhoods?

Marbles is a basically simple game, yet it can be defined by rules which are quite complex, and which are freely altered to suit the players and the environment of the game. The rules are part of a rich lore, strong in ritual and terminology, which surrounds the game and becomes deeply embedded in the memory. Over the years many of the vigorously negotiated rules and imaginative terms of Marbles lore have somehow slipped away, and today's children often play a pale imitation of the dynamic games of the

past. The marbles themselves are still in great demand, and children eagerly swap 'oilies', 'beach burns', 'butterflies' and 'spaghettis' with each other and argue over the value of a marble with a small chip out of it.

Marbles is a game of passion. Feelings run high and conflict is inevitable, which probably explains why it is one of the games frequently banned from school playgrounds. But is banning the answer? It's the easy option - no more fights, no more tears, no more accusations of cheating - but what does it say to children? Does it give them the message that the only way to deal with conflict is to avoid it? Does it reinforce the actions of children who look to adults to solve their problems for them? Down the ages, children have learned how to solve their own problems through playing traditional games. The playground can be a tough place, and the social skills learned there can be carried on into adulthood. At one Melbourne primary school, the children and teachers worked together to solve the problems of a new Marbles season. The result was a set of rules for fair play, which allowed the children to get on with the game and develop a very strong and vibrant marbles culture within the school.

Jacks or Knucklebones is another ancient and enduring game which causes a reaction similar to that of Marbles. If the rules of the game have been forgotten, the action of tossing the jacks and catching them on the back of the hand remains a reflex action. It's as if the hands automatically know what to do. The challenge is to try and make 50-year-old hands do what they did when they were 10 years old.

Knucklebones as playthings have been around since prehistoric times. They were used for gambling, foretelling the future and playing a game of skill. The game requires quick reflexes, good hand-eye co-ordination and lots of patience. Today, it is played in similar ways all over the world, using

different kinds of jacks - bamboo sticks, stones, little bean bags, metal stars and plastic knucklebones. It's rare to find anyone playing with real sheep's knucklebones in Australia today.

Years ago in Australia, the game was more complicated than the versions played nowadays. There were many steps, each a little harder than the last, with names like 'Over the Wall', 'Horse in the Stable' and 'Granny's False Teeth'. A game could last the whole morning, and players practised by themselves for hours to hone their skills and become Jacks champions. Today's game lacks the steps which made it so challenging and so rewarding to complete. It has in a sense become 'de-skilled', as have other playground games like Marbles, Hopscotch and String Games which also have long histories and traditions which were passed down through the generations over hundreds and sometimes thousands of years.

The traditional games of the playground, while still very much a part of children's lives today, are facing new challenges. They have survived wars, technological evolution, the passive entertainment of television and the mass-marketing of Barbie dolls, but the question is will they survive the computer? Many of today's children 'surf' the Net, send E-mail messages to their friends, 'chat' on-line with people around the world and carry notebook computers instead of paper and pencils. The latest generation of games are virtual rather than actual, and pre-programmed with the 'right' moves, allowing little scope for creativity or imagination. In contrast, traditional playground games are all about children making their own rules, learning to negotiate and interact with other children and using their imagination to create and adapt their own

folklore. Is it possible to create a harmonious connection between these totally different forms of play?

One computer program currently being developed is attempting to do just that. It uses the creative and interactive opportunities of the computer medium to present the richness and diversity of eight playground games in new and exciting ways. The games are Marbles, Jacks, String Games, Hopscotch, Skipping, Elastics, Clapping Games and Counting-Out Rituals. The program's initiator, Mary Featherston, wanted to offer children new ideas and information about familiar games, to stimulate their interest and enthusiasm and make them keen to try it out for themselves - in the playground of course. These games are definitely not computer games - they are games on computer. Mary, designer of the Museum of Victoria's Children's Museum's 'You're IT!' exhibition of children's traditional games, has been working with a creative team which includes primary school-age children. The children have multiple roles as presenters, advisers, traditional games experts and critical computer users. The aim is to produce a program for, about and by children, which seeks to uphold the tradition of games being passed on from child to child, as in the playground. Adults have a role, too. They demonstrate some of their own childhood games which perhaps aren't around anymore, or have lost the rich lore and tradition which made them so memorable. The program draws on research from many sources, including the Australian Children's Folklore Collection, Australia's only public archive of children's own folklore.



Marbles games - Rings (April 1997). *Photo by Judy McKinty*

In the program there are different versions of each game, and surprising information about the history and traditions associated with it. For instance, did you know that stone marbles have been found in the grave of a child who died around 4000 BC in Egypt? Or that 'Children's Games', painted by Pieter Breughal around 1560, contains over 80 games, most of which are still played today? Children using the program will be able to explore the painting and discover four Marbles games in progress. They will probably be familiar with three of them, and may be tempted to try the fourth. There are also Marbles games from other countries, examples of different flicks, marbles words, names and values, old and new collections and stories of memorable Marbles games. There is also a sequence about how the Melbourne school solved its marbles problems - a valuable example of adult-child collaboration and perhaps a model for teachers and parents who have trouble coping with the start of a new Marbles season. Each game is treated in a similar way, with new perspectives being offered for children to explore and discover. People have full control over where they go and what they see within the program. It has been

designed in the spirit of play itself - lively, cheeky, innovative, fun, amusing, sometimes serious and always dynamic.

In the String Games segment there is a section on Aboriginal string figures. Australia was the first continent where string figures were recorded, and Aboriginal people have a long tradition as string figure-makers. At one point in history, over two-thirds of all the string figures recorded by anthropologists were known to Aborigines, and there are figures unique to Aboriginal culture included in the program. The figures range from very simple to complex, and there are a number of tricks and traps for children to try on their friends. Throughout the program, tradition and culture are presented as important elements of the games.

The program presents children's traditional games from an Australian perspective, and draws on the richness of Victoria's multicultural community to give the games an international context - each of the games can be found in countries all over the world. It is a measure of the fundamental nature of these games

that they have endured for so long, and that they are still as popular as ever. The development of the traditional games computer program acknowledges the importance of children's folklore and will help to make the games accessible to anyone who enjoys playing.

(‘Keeps’ means all marbles won are kept, ‘dubs’ are the marbles put into the centre of the ring, ‘no fudging’ means no moving your hand forward when flicking, ‘no clears’ means no clearing away dirt or obstacles from the path of your marble and ‘drizzy’ means throwing your marble to the line to see who goes first.)

Judy McKinty is a cultural heritage interpreter who has worked on major projects for the Children's Museum (Museum of Victoria) and the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at the University of Melbourne. She is currently working on the CD Rom project described above.

If you know any of these games we'd love to hear from you. Please write to Judy McKinty, 54 Erica Ave, Glen Iris 3146 or send e-mail to: arybf@ozemail.com.au

We're especially interested in games from overseas.

Dedicated to Henry van Bakel-Oliver who died on 31-12-96 at five months, SIDS.

THE STATE OF PLAY

PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S ORAL CULTURE

A conference organised by
The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language
in association with The Folklore Society

To be held at the University of Sheffield
14-17 April 1998

The study of children's oral culture was pioneered by folklorists in the nineteenth century. Now, a hundred years after the publication of Alice Gomme's ground-breaking collection of children's games, and forty years after the publication of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* by Iona and Peter Opie, it is a uniquely opportune time to review the present state of children's oral culture.

What are the dynamics of children's traditions in the 1990s? How do these relate to current concerns about children's play, and children's social and cognitive development?

Presentations are invited on any aspect of the oral culture of school-age children: games and imaginative play, wordplay and rhymes, jokes and riddles, stories and songs, customs and beliefs. A variety of academic approaches is welcomed.

Please send a title and short abstract (maximum 250 words) of proposals for presentations (individual papers, to last 30 minutes including discussion, discussion panels, display boards or other medium of presentation) to the Conference Organisers at the address below. The deadline for submissions is 31 October 1997.

To join the Conference mailing list, please contact the Conference Organisers:

Julia Bishop and Mavis Curtis
Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language
University of Sheffield
Sheffield S10 2TN United Kingdom

Tel: 0114 222 6296

Email: J.C.Bishop@sheffield.ac.uk

A Place To Play

John Evans

I was fortunate enough to be visiting London recently and, as I wandered around the inner city streets one pleasant summer afternoon, I came across a sign which said 'Corams Fields : No Adults Unless Accompanied by a Child'. I was so taken by this sign that I had to have a photo of it so the next day I was back and, much to the bewildered amusement of some passers-by, I carefully aimed and took a photo. I had seen plenty of designated play spaces before, green triangles set amongst the tar and cement, but never one where the pre-requisite to enter was being with a child. In this adult-centric world we live in it struck me as a wonderfully bold and innovative idea.

Here I was in the centre of one of the largest, busiest and most congested cities in the world, with a sign that gave some unique privileges to children. I desperately wanted to go in and see what was there but I was not accompanied by a child. I would have loved to have known more about how such a place came to be set aside for children and just how far it went in catering to children's needs. I wondered, for example, whether or not children were involved in decisions about the rules of the park and what sort of animals and equipment went into the park. The more travelled student of play might know of many such places around the world but, for me, it was a first.

The best I could do was to walk the perimeter of the field and peer through the cyclone fence which was presumably there to keep young children in and unaccompanied adults out. What a change! Nestling among the busy London streets was this haven for inner city children. It was by no means the most inspirational or creative park that I had seen but there were large trees which provided wonderful shade, well grassed areas for field games, fixed and loose play equipment and animal shelters where children could look at, play with and feed the various two and four legged residents. Perhaps best of all, it was a place where children, with or without

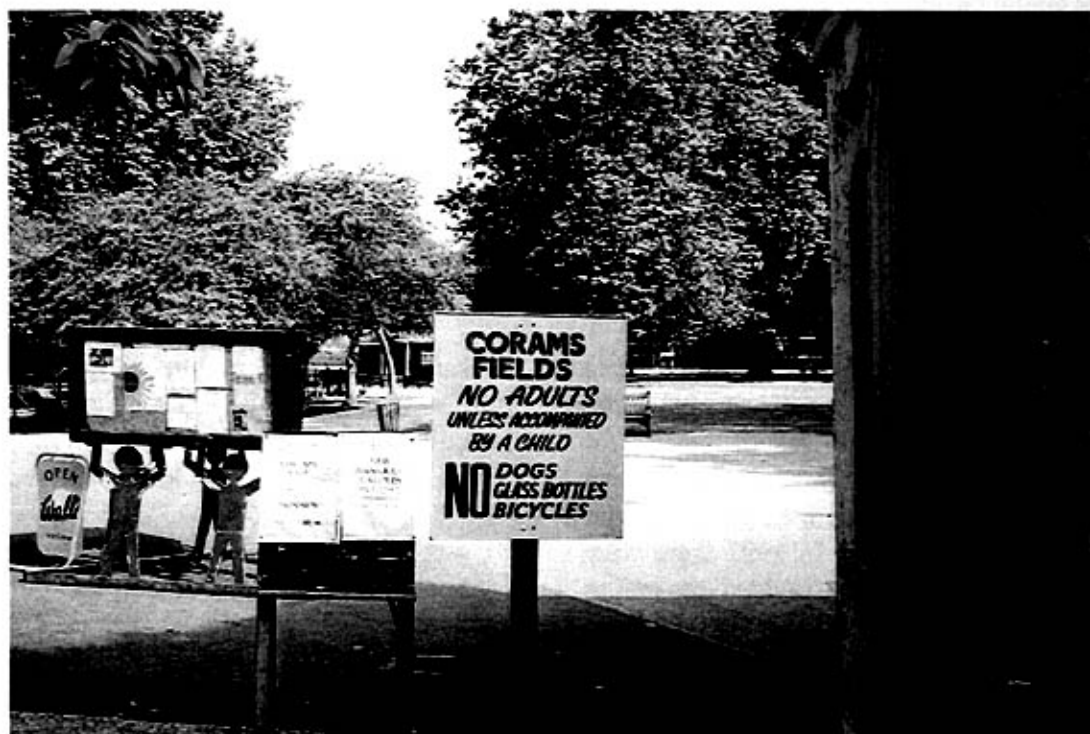
their parents, could seek refuge from the hurly-burly of city life and, in a safe and supervised environment, pause to enjoy each other's company.

Cities are traditionally designed by adults for adults with relatively little thought to children's play needs. In a place like London even crossing the road can be an adventure for the very young and provide some anxious moments for the very old whose final few steps are often accompanied by the harping horns of speeding cars and impatient drivers. Despite the inhospitable environment, children do play. Colin Ward's excellent study of life in large cities shows how, even with the limited space and constant traffic, children's enthusiasm for play remains strong. It certainly takes different forms. He describes how, in one housing estate, children rode on the roof of the lifts, in the process scaring the occupants and placing themselves in considerable danger. Another popular game was to knock on doors then run away before the occupants came to the door. Still another, which many of us could relate to, was to press the lift buttons so the people riding the lift had to go to every single floor. Children play a similar game in busy streets where they press the WALK button to stop the traffic and then casually stroll on as the traffic screams to a halt and drivers grind their teeth when they see no-one crossing.

All of these forms of play are evidence of children's adaptability. As June Factor reminds us, 'so powerful is the urge to play, to move outside the limitations of the immediate moment, the here and now, the status of smallness, weakness, ignorance and powerlessness, that children even in the most terrible circumstances insist on playing'. The tenacity of children in war-torn Northern Ireland has been graphically described by McKee. Twenty-three years of turbulence in the form of bombs, assassinations and riots have failed to deter children in cities such as Belfast from playing in

highly imaginative and creative ways. We should not, however, allow children's remarkable capacity to adapt to alienating environments to lull us into a sense of complacency. Streets are becoming more hazardous and not just from motorised traffic. Almost on a daily basis we are confronted with news of crimes against children and of accidents in

and around the home, street and school. The bigger the city the more complex and challenging the problem. There is a growing need for parks like Corams Fields; parks which are not just token green islands in a concrete landscape, but places where children can have a real say in shaping the play environment.



Playground just for children (London, 1996). Photo by John Evans

Access and diversity are the key elements, according to Robin Moore, whose book *Childhood's Domain* provides an interesting insight into how and where children play. 'Playground stereotypes need to be expanded into a vision of children interacting among themselves, with family and community, in every place lived in and used'. The notion of 'keeping kids off the street' is, according to Moore, not only unrealistic, but undesirable. In city living, streets are an integral part of the landscape. They are meeting places and places where children can play close to home. He argues that 'designated playgrounds can add important play opportunities

and attract activity, but they cannot substitute for the immediacy of the street'.

The difficulty of providing and/or retaining designated play spaces is that they require a commitment to the importance of play. They are resource intensive. There can be little doubt that the space occupied by Corams Fields in inner London would be eagerly sought after by wealthy conglomerates with a keen eye for well-positioned real estate. Conserving these 'special' places is a priority only for those who understand the meaning of play in children's lives which is why this particular playground captured my

attention. I don't know what led to the development of this park but, in this day and age, you have to admire a policy which places the children first and adults second. There is a lot of rhetoric surrounding this approach but not very often does one see some tangible evidence of it happening. 'No adults unless accompanied by children' is certainly a change from the signs we more typically see around our cities which proclaim in bold letters that 'children cannot enter unless in the company of adults'. For once it was nice to see the bold letters giving priority to the rights of children.

Reference:

R. Moore *Childhood's Domain: play and place in child development*, London; Dover, NH: Croom Helm 1986

Dr John Evans lectures in the Faculty of Education, Deakin University, Geelong, Vic.

CHILDREN'S PLAY TRADITIONS ON YACATA ISLAND, FIJI

Jenny Williams

Yacata village is the only village on Yacata Island, and consists of just over two hundred people. The village school caters for children aged from six years (grade 1) to thirteen years (grade 8). The children then go to another island to continue schooling. In 1992 there were fifty-eight children at the school, divided into grades 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, 7 and 8). Formality and discipline were noticeable during my visit, which somewhat inhibited my observations.

Upon my arrival, the principal called the school together for a formal meeting and introduction. The children then dispersed and I was escorted to the room for grades 1 and 2. They sang for me a number of songs in English: *Sing me a Rainbow*, *Old Macdonald*, *In the Rain*, and *Ten Fat Sausages*. The teacher told me they sing many English songs and rhymes as a way of teaching the children English. They also sang for me a traditional Fijian song about cows, and a Fijian song about a butterfly.

I asked the teacher if I could observe the children playing outside...The children were playing a game of 'tag' or 'chasey'. I asked how they decided who was 'it' or the one to do the chasing. A girl stated that in each year level they have two leaders

(usually the oldest or the biggest) who delegate duties or roles to the other children. The teacher didn't know of any counting-out rhymes as they were not necessary as the leaders chose...

I was able to observe other children, younger than school age, roaming around the outside of the school grounds with the smaller ones following the bigger ones. They involved themselves in climbing trees and drawing in the dirt with sticks or large stones...

The boys played a traditional spear-throwing game, which is used as a sport against other islands. It is similar to a javelin in Australia. The spear is made of wood, is approximately one and a half metres in length, with a tip carved from wood approximately 6 cm in diameter at the base, carved to a point at the top. A hole is carved on the inside to slide on to the wooden pole. At one stage a boy took the top off and used it as a whistle, blowing down the hole while resting the base against his bottom lip. The throw is marked by its length.

I also observed a number of boys involving themselves in throwing and catching a rugby ball, standing approximately 6 metres away from each

other...I was shown a Fijian game called *Zuru* which seemed to me a game of strategy and is popular amongst the children. It appeared to create great enjoyment. The girls also showed me their game of *Jacks*, for which they used small stones or nuts off a tree, approximately 3 cm in diameter.

A number of children were skipping and I was able to listen to their skipping rhymes. I found the European influence interesting, as the children didn't have any Fijian skipping rhymes; they were all in English. I questioned this, and was told by the oldest girl that there were none in Fijian...

Fijian children have a toy which they make from a piece of cloth and a tuna tin lid. They make two holes in the centre of the lid, then thread an old scrap of cloth or string, or anything they can find, through the holes and join it together. The cloth needs to be long and thin. The cloth and lid are then twirled around tightly by moving both hands simultaneously in small circles. You then pull the cloth tightly, move your hands in and out the cloth, and the tin spins in and out. I had a turn and didn't find it an easy task at all, and had the children

laughing at my expense! The children of course were experts...

ZURU

Activity: Six squares are marked out along the grass or ground. There are two teams of three. It is the objective of one team to cover between them all six squares by running or getting into them, then all ending in the same square, holding hands and calling *zuru!* It is the objective of the other team to prevent their opposition gaining entry into squares. To do this they need to tag them before they cross over the line. Once tagged, the person must return to his/her previous square. Once the team has won by calling *zuru*, the teams swap over.

(Note: *zuru* has no Fijian meaning.)

Extracts from a research essay written by Jenny Williams while a final year undergraduate student at the Institute of Early Childhood Development (now Department of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne). Jenny Williams made a brief visit to Yacata Island school in 1992.



Zuru. Photo by J Williams