

Seth Giddings 2014 ‘What is the state of play? The work of Iona and Peter Opie in the age of postdigital play.’

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If children played their games invariably in the way the previous generation played them, the study of youthful recreation could be a matter merely of antiquarian scholarship. But they do not. Despite the motherly influence of tradition...children’s play is like every other social activity, it is subject to continual change. The fact that the games are played slightly differently in different places, and may even vary in name, is itself evidence that mutation takes place. (Opie & Opie, 1969, p. 8)

Re-reading Iona Opie’s *The People in the Playground* (1994) I was struck by the fact that the children she was watching, and wryly commenting on were in their final year of primary school at the end of the 1970s – and I am of the same generation.. My playground was a few hundred miles north of Hampshire, where Iona Opie was carrying out weekly observations at her local school, and we called the ubiquitous chasing game Tig, not Tag, and we were just ‘It’, not ‘On It’, but some of the details struck me like a dunked Proustian cake. I had forgotten the inexplicable pleasure of smashing Matchbox toy cars against a wall. The obsession with crisps at breaktime was familiar, but some details came flooding back – for instance, the novelty and popularity of the Space Raiders snacks brand.

A superficial glance at Peter and Iona Opie’s published studies of children’s play and games might lead a contemporary reader to see them as documents of a lost age. Illustrated with black-and-white photographs from the 1950s that capture girls skipping in cardigans and knee-length skirts, and boys with short-back-and-sides haircuts and sturdy shoes shouting and wrestling, they list elaborate and now exotic-sounding games, songs and rituals: Split the Kipper, Ghosties in the Garret, Tom Tiddler’s Ground, Skin the Cuddy. This reader might regard their work as inadvertent salvage anthropology, analogous to the recording of tribal cultures assumed to be on the brink of disappearance in the glare of encroaching Western modernity. The games, songs and modes of play in *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (1969), it is often assumed, have similarly disappeared from children’s everyday lives, for these rituals and their oral, ludic and gestural culture have proved no match for the hypnotic glow of the television screen and the addictive grasp of the videogame and social media. The Opies’ books represent, then, Western children’s culture before the full impact of late 20th century commercial media culture. Those Space Raiders could now be seen as a harbinger of doom even greater than that of television for in name, shape and packaging, the snacks were inspired by the first hint of the digital game revolution to come – the Japanese arcade game *Space Invaders*. Was this, then, the last possible moment that Iona Opie could have observed ‘traditional’ play? Am I of the last generation to have played ‘traditionally’?

Today, after the electronic and digital media flood, it is so often assumed that children rarely or never play outside. They have forgotten the games their parents and grandparents played, the songs they sang, the embodied techniques of skipping and Ballsie they perfected, the thread of oral culture of jokes and rhymes snapped by the

invasive grasp of television entertainment. Or now, perhaps, in the second decade of the 21st century, it is only their grandparents who played these games, as parents of young children today were born into a media culture in which videogames were already firmly established – they are Rupert Murdoch’s ‘Nintendo generation’.

And yet, in the Opies’ books, there is a wealth of methodological and observational material that has resonated strongly with my own ethnographic work in playful digital culture. It is immediately clear that images, narratives and actions from popular commercial media in the 20th century did not swamp ‘traditional play’ but instead were worked into longer-established game structures and songs. Many games now considered ‘traditional’ must have been shaped by comics and Hollywood: ‘Cops and Robbers’, ‘Cowboys and Indians’. The playground ethnographies of the recent ‘Children’s Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age’ project (2009-2011), funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (<http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/playgroundgames/>) are clear evidence that, as screen media images capture children’s attention at home, in the playground they are swept up, adapted and incorporated into the phantasmagorical flow of imaginative play. *Ben 10*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *The Incredibles* are invoked in the 2010s just as *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Thunderbirds* and the *Lone Ranger* were in the 1950s and 60s (Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn, Bishop, 2013).

As well as listing and categorising games and songs, the Opies were attentive to the mutational nature of play, the wax and wane of games’ popularity, the shifts and hybridisations that work across time and space. They observed that folklorists’ studying of play ‘chiefly in terms of decay’ dates back at least to the nineteenth century. Generations of parents across the late 20th century, they note, have worried about their children’s unorganised and unsophisticated play, and bemoan the loss of the sophisticated sociality of their own childhoods:

The belief that traditional games are dying out is itself traditional; it was received opinion even when those who now regret the passing of the games were themselves vigorously playing them [and note that the Opies are here writing in the late 1960s]. We overlook the fact that as we have grown older our interests have changed, we have given up haunting the places where children play, we no longer have eyes for the games, and not noticing them suppose them to have vanished. We forget that children’s amusements are not always ones that attract attention ... Children’s games are ones which the players adapt to their surroundings and the time available ... The places they like best for play are the secret places ‘where no one else goes’. (Opie & Opie, 1969, pp 14-15)

These ‘surroundings’ and ‘secret places’ must now include media environments and virtual locations as well as actual hiding places.



Postdigital play: 'Light Bug', a digitally augmented swing <http://www.react-hub.org.uk/playsandbox/projects/2014/connected-play/>

This is not to argue that children's culture is untouched by substantial social, technological and historical change. For instance, it seems clear that many children in industrialised countries (middle-class children, at least) have fewer opportunities to play in the street than their grandparents in the 1950s. If this is the case, and many children spend more time indoors now in the playful environment offered by TV, Internet media and videogames, then, following Iona Opie's implicit trust in children's play, we might regard this historical fact as more of a methodological problem than a historical crisis of childhood. Whilst Iona Opie's extensive and peripatetic research through playgrounds of the British Isles is not possible in the atomised locales of the domestic environment, the dynamics of sociality, conservatism and mutational newness still energise young children's play lives, as do the rhythms of emergence and waning of popularity of particular games or modes of play.

In fact, the Opies' oeuvre offers rich resources for a long view of children's indoor/media culture. *The Treasures of Childhood*, a lavishly illustrated book compiled by Iona, her son Robert, and Brian Alderson, documenting a mere fraction of Peter and Iona's extensive collection of children's books and toys (Opie, Opie and Alderson, 1989), suggests myriad ways in which children's culture has shifted, changed and returned over centuries. Flicking through its pages with contemporary videogame culture in mind, we can find numerous examples of grotesque bodies, carnivalesque saturnalia and gleeful violence. Videogame play is often compared to outdoor play or to television viewing, yet this history of children's media documents numerous ludic and interactive devices from the familiar board and card games to elaborate hybrids of toy and book, cybertextual narrative devices of flaps, and animated figures from the Victorian nursery. Add to these the genealogy of automata from 18th century court spectacle to clockwork toys and optical devices (zoetropes,

phenakistoscopes, etc.) and we see some tangled threads of the technocultural emergence of cinema and electronic games themselves. As the Opies put it, ‘the cinema industry might be embarrassed at being dubbed simply “the most successful of the toys that move”’ (Opie, Opie & Alderson, 1989, p. 143).

Iona Opie’s *The People in the Playground* is part anthropology and part ethology – a study of behaviours somewhere between nature and culture. Perhaps by necessity, most social and cultural academic research sets out a critical argument, to identify risk, say, or chart social pressures of gender and class in children’s culture and media. Iona Opie here describes, and her pithy, uncluttered observations – supported by the authority of decades of such observation and scholarly knowledge – do not judge or critique. She makes sardonic, sometimes rather blunt, observations on some children’s characters and appearance, comments that wouldn’t get past any contemporary research ethics committee. But her writing is always underpinned by a fundamental respect for the children and for their games. The book’s title picks up the way children refer to themselves – not as *children* or *kids*, but as *people*. These people are as fully rounded in their capacity for charm and irritation as any adult. They are not romanticised, and nor are they demarcated as always ‘at risk’ in their play, as in so much contemporary research on children, media and technology. They are actual, embodied, social beings, with a sophisticated and complex culture erupting in the brief serial durations of school playtimes.

Contemporary play observers have to bring new observational and theoretical resources to bear – the sheer density of the digital media ecology in children’s everyday lives cannot be fully accounted for by Iona Opie’s open-air observations and improvised shorthand, or by ethnographies of particular moments of domestic videogame play. For all the continuities, there are significant transformations of play (and ways of thinking about play) today. In recent years, game studies has built up rich methodological and conceptual resources addressing virtualities, online cultures, simulation, and a rethinking of the realities and time-spaces of play and games. All this work would be worthless, though, if it were based only on assumptions about gameplay, whether virtual or actual, a ‘reading off’ of play from media texts and toy design, or the reassuring pessimism of salvage anthropology. If we learn nothing else from the Opies, let us emulate their respect for, and belief in, children and play - their cultures and behaviours, language and nonsense - in the face of both disapproving and benign adult intervention.

References

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