

NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL PLAY FORUM
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PLAY TODAY
Judy McKinty

When I was a child, last century, the world was a very different place. I grew up in Ballarat in the 1950s and 60s, and one of the most powerful memories of my childhood is the freedom I had to roam and play. I walked to and from school by myself or with a friend, and there was always time for a game on the way. On rainy days the gutters would be overflowing, the racing water waiting to snatch the sticks and leaves we'd throw in, and on one memorable occasion my little brown cardboard school case!

In the summer holidays the days seemed to last forever. We roamed around the neighbourhood looking for people to play with, and if we came across kids from the Catholic school we'd yell out, 'Catholic dogs, sittin' on logs, eating maggots out of frogs!' And they'd reply in kind, of course. We made brown paper kites and flew them in the paddock across the creek. We played Hidey and Chasey, and Marbles in a ring scratched into the dirt beside the road. We dressed the cat up in doll's clothes, and on one momentous occasion my friend and I were allowed to pack a picnic lunch and ride our bikes from one end of Ballarat to the other and out through the Arch of Victory to pat horses in a paddock. Children can sometimes place great importance on small things.

At school there was Queenie and Hoppo Bumpo, and Puss in the Corner in the shelter shed. We tore the middle pages from our exercise books to make paper darts and fortune-tellers with naughty words under the flaps. We were in awe of the older children who were really good at games – the girl who could get right through a game of Sevens without dropping the ball, the nimble ones who could 'run in' without fouling the rope in Double Dutch skippy, and the boy who could do dangerous tricks on the monkey-bars, like hanging from one leg or doing flips and landing on the ground.

It's easy to think of these times as 'the good old days'. I have been told many times that children nowadays don't play as much as we used to, that there's too much TV and DVDs and computer games to keep them inside and inactive. They don't play games like Marbles any more.

Well, I've got news for you – THEY DO!

They don't just *play* Marbles, they are passionate about everything to do with the game. They identify different types of marbles according to their size, colour, pattern and surface finish. Museum curators couldn't do a better job of sorting, classifying and naming their collections. And the wonderful names they give them – spaghettis, ice-cream jellies, bird's eggs, butterflies, ghosties, blue moons, sunsets, oilies and, of course, snots. There are hundreds of names depending on which school you go to and who you play with.

And it doesn't stop there. There are also around ten different sizes of marble, each with its own name – from big to small: Whale's Eye, Emperor, Grandpa, King, Tombowler, Semi, Junior, Normal, Joker and Peewee. So the full name of a very big, very shiny marble with a bubble inside would be an Emperor Oily Bubble. And, once again, there are different names in different places.

The richness of children's play is most evident in school playgrounds, particularly in urban areas where newly-built family homes, sometimes dubbed McMansions, now stretch from fence to fence, covering almost the entire property on which they stand, with no room for backyard games of Chasey or cricket. In the city, schoolyards are places where there is still enough space for children's own culture to flourish if left alone. A little benign neglect is good, in this case.

I have been fortunate to be able to do some research in Australian school playgrounds over the past ten years or so, and the games collected are evidence of the strong traditional nature of children's play, and also of the way children adapt their games to fit changing times and changing places. Their games, rhymes, riddles and jokes reflect the society in which they live.

Nowadays, when children at one school want to take time out from a game, they don't say 'barley' – they hold up two fingers and say 'Pause'. And if they muck up a clapping rhyme and have to do it again they say 'Replay', but they still say 'You're IT!'

In the 70s one of the rhymes was about the political situation in our nation's capital. It went like this:

Gough, Gough, had a bad cough
Went to the doctor's, got three days off.
People yelled, 'The country's in ruin!'
Gough called out, 'It's all the doctor's doin'.

And here's another one for cricket fans:

Ashes to ashes,
Dust to dust,
If Lillee don't get ya
Then Thommo must.

Ah, those magical names... close your eyes and you can almost see the moustache and the mullet haircut.

Now there are clapping rhymes about 'Ronald McDonald' and modern-day parodies:

Mary had a little chook,
And it began to sicken.
She took it to Kentucky Fried
And now it's finger-lickin'.

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Children even parody their *own* rhymes. The clapping rhyme ‘My Auntie Anna plays the pianna twenty-four hours a day’ becomes ‘My Auntie Rose picks her nose twenty-four hours a day’. And then there’s ‘My Uncle Bart’....

But children still say, ‘Two plus two equals four, kick the teacher out the door’. Some things never change.

Children’s play is rich in creative possibilities. The tanbark underneath a climbing frame can be shaped into a ‘cake’ and decorated with leaves, sticks and berries, to be shared with friends at a make-believe party, and a large gravel area is a good place to make ‘Sand Fairies’, the playground version of Snow Angels – it has the same result but is a lot dustier.

And here is one of the ‘good old games’ that has been given a make-over. Remember playing Cat’s Cradles with string? You probably remember making the Cup and Saucer and the Parachute? Now let me introduce you to the Bar Radiator and the Arts Centre spire.

So despite all the electronic technology, the vanishing play spaces, the over-scheduling of children’s lives and the restrictions we place on them, their play continues to be rich, imaginative, cheeky, rude, clever, funny, irreverent and very, very necessary.