

## Beach Bums, Bloodsuckers and Ice-Cream Jellies

Judy McKinty

Marbles as playthings have a long history – smooth, round ‘game stones’ discovered in Egypt<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere suggest that marbles, as we know them, have been used in play for at least 5000 years. Archaeologists routinely uncover clay, stone and glass marbles during their investigations of the ruins of cities and civilisations, but this evidence can only give us a very small picture of the game. Missing is the ‘life’ of the game itself, the intangible elements the players bring with them – the knowledge of how the game is played, how to flick for accuracy, which marbles are the most valuable for swapping, the words to call out to stop a player from gaining an advantage and the name of each different kind of marble.

In the editors’ notes in this issue of *Play and Folklore*, reference is made to the fact that much of children’s play can be classified as Intangible Cultural Heritage under the United Nations’ definition<sup>2</sup>. Marbles lore is a good example of how important the intangible elements of a game can be – how they give the game its shape, its life and its passion.

I have, for some years, been researching and collecting marbles, and one of the richest areas of research concerns the amazing variety of names children give to the different types and sizes of marbles. Children have special names for different types of marbles, but not everyone calls them the same names. It depends on where they live, which school they attend and who they play with, although one name – Cat’s Eye – has been used since the marble first appeared in the early 1950s, and can

still be found in several countries. The names are based on the marbles’ appearance – usually the colours and patterns – and are an indication of children’s acute, and sometimes humorous, observations and experience of the world. For instance, in Australia, opaque, khaki-green coloured marbles, often known as Army Balls, are also called Snots or Snotballs, black marbles with red patches are Redbacks, named after the poisonous spider found in Australia and New Zealand, and shiny white marbles with coloured speckles on the outside are sometimes called Speckled Eggs or Birdshits.

The terms for marbles sizes are comparatively constrained as there is a limit to the number of different sizes manufactured. I collected names for 10 different-sized marbles from one Victorian school – from smallest to biggest: Peewee, Joker, Normal, Junior, Semi, Tombowler, King, Grandpa, Emperor and Whale’s Eye. In Western Australia, a Peewee is a Tiddly, a Semi is a Tom and a Tombowler is a Super, and there are other variations from place to place throughout Australia and in other countries.

The names for size and type are combined to give a full description of the marble. For example, the smallest clear green marble might be called a Peewee Froggy, a white Tombowler with red swirls could be a Tom Bloodsucker and the largest transparent marble, with an air bubble inside, would be a Whale’s Eye Bubble. There can also be Grandpa Oily Specks, King Vampires, Semi Galaxies and Junior Pearl Beach Bums – the names are only limited by the children’s imagination.



Marbles have traditionally been named by children as part of their own lore of the game, but there has been a development in the marketing of marbles which is changing this tradition – children can now buy marbles which have already been given a name by the manufacturers. They come in little bags with a colourful label marked ‘Bengal Tiger’, ‘Cockatoo’, ‘Pterodactyl’, ‘Tidal Wave’, ‘Rooster’ and ‘Stardust’ among scores of other ready-made names, which children have picked up and are using in their games. It will be interesting to see how long it will take, for instance, for a blood-red Rooster to become a Zombie’s Eye or something similar.

The following marbles names have been collected in Australia, from children and adults, since the 1990s. Marbles with manufacturers’ names have not been included unless there is also a different child’s name for the marble. Each marble shown is just one example of the type – there are several combinations of colours and patterns for each name. The diversity of these combinations adds to the appeal of marbles as collectible objects and makes the contents of a contemporary marbles bag so attractive.

It is interesting to note that in 1996, the marbles players at one school had names for three types of old marbles (Claypots, Olympics and Moons), two of which were manufactured in the late 1800s and one with a much longer history. Those types of marbles had disappeared from school playgrounds around 50 years before and, at the time, were more likely to be found in the hands of adult collectors.

*Marbles images by Judy McKinty.*

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*If you are/were a marbles player and know of any other names for the marbles shown, you can contribute to this research by sending them to [judy@pixeltech.com.au](mailto:judy@pixeltech.com.au)*

#### ENDNOTES

1 Andre Dollinger, *Ancient Egyptian games: Children’s games found and described by W.M. Flinders Petrie*, viewed on <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/timelines/topics/games1.htm>

2 For the UN definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage see <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002>

3 Everett Grist, *Big Book of Marbles*, (Paducah, Collector Books, 1993), 35.

4 *ibid.* 36.

5 *ibid.* 18-21.

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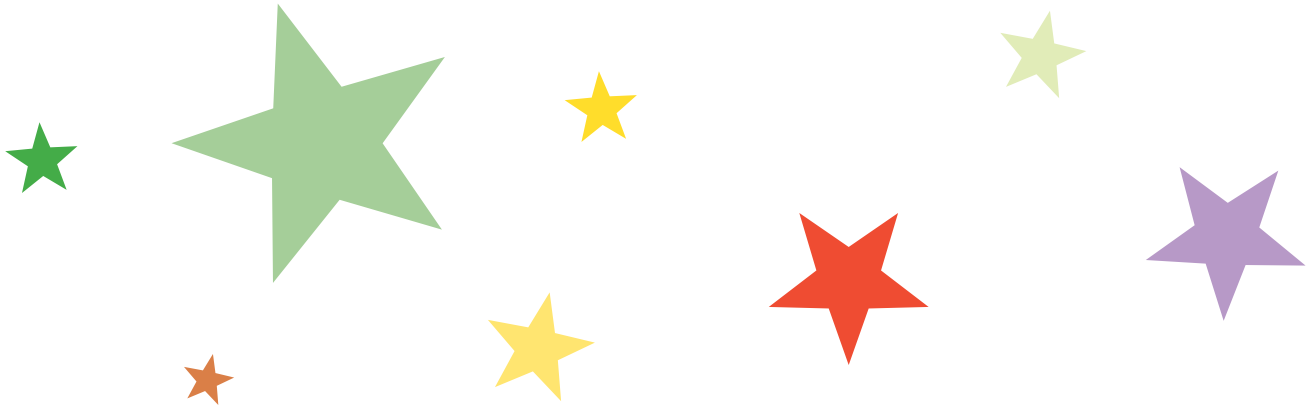
TYPE OF MARBLE		NAMES COLLECTED SO FAR
Army Ball		Army Balls, Snots, Snotballs, Greenies
Beach Ball		Beach Balls, Beach Bums, Queenslander (Colac, Vic. 1960s), Beachies, Gelatis, Mint Lollies, Parrots (Nth Qld), Americanos (Kenya, 1960s), Creamies (Bahamas), Chineesje (Netherlands)
Black Jet		Black Jets, Knights, Cannonballs, Black Pearls
Bloodsucker		Bloodsuckers (Ballarat, Vic. 1950s), Swirls, Whirlpools, Blood Alleys (England), Candy Canes, Spaghetitis (Nth Qld), Swirls (Bahamas)
Blue Moon		Blue Moons, Clearies, Glassies (Kenya), Dolphins, Blue Oceans, Blue Gels, Blue Genies, Sapphires
Broccoli		Broccolis, Eagle Eggs, Bloodspots (red specks)
Bubble		Bubbles, Clears, Ghosties, Lemonades
Butterfly		Butterflies, Starfish, Twisters, Cat's Eyes (Bahamas)
Canary		Canaries, Yellow Jackets (manufacturer's name)
Cat's Eye		Cat's Eyes, Flickers, Dazzlers, Dibs (Sydney), Cat's Eyes (Bahamas), Aggies, Devil's Eyes
Claypot		Claypots (Plain clay marbles like these have been around for thousands of years. In the early 20 <sup>th</sup> century children in Australia called them Commonies <sup>3</sup> .)
Coke		Cokes, Beers, Clearies, Brown Genies
Fireball		Fireballs, Speeders, Red Devils (manufacturer's name)
Flag		Flags, Beach Balls, Agates, Americanos (Kenya 1960s), Chineesje (Netherlands)
Froggy		Froggies, Green Genies, Frog's Eyes, Lollies, Emeralds, Clearies, Moonies, Glassies (Wollongong, NSW), Zeleni (Yugoslavia)



TYPE OF MARBLE		NAMES COLLECTED SO FAR
Galaxy		Galaxies, Jaffas, Dinosaurs, Specks, Spotted Moons, Speckled Eggs, Planets, Volcanoes, Milky Ways, Speckled Moons, Bird's Eggs (Nth Qld)
Gumball		Gumballs, Lollies, Pearls
Hawk's Eye		Hawk Eyes (yellow flash – USA), Tiger's Eyes
Ice-cream Jelly		Ice-cream Jellies, Toothpastes, Galaxies (Nth Qld).
Jaffa		Jaffas, Speckled Eggs, Planets, Volcanoes, Milky Ways, Galaxies (NSW), Bird's Eggs (Nth Qld)
Lightning Bolt		Lightning Bolts, Lightnings, Thunderbolts, Thunders, Dragon's Eyes
Moon		Moons (These glazed and fired clay marbles were made during the late 1800s, and are known to adult collectors as Benningtons <sup>4</sup> .)
Oily		Oilies, Argles, Silver Swans (Tasmania, 1989), Moonies (Nth Qld), Metallics, Genies, Eagle Eyes (blue ones, USA), Bloodsuckers (red ones), Champagne Charlies (pinky ones, Tasmania, 1989), Mirrors
Olympic		Olympic (These marbles were made during the late 1800s, and are known to adult collectors as Transparent Swirls <sup>5</sup> .)
Panda		Pandas, Swirls, Stripies, Magpies
Pearl		Pearls, Bindis (green ones, Brisbane, Qld), Shinies, Frog's Eyes (green ones). Also by colour, for example Red Pearls, Blue Pearls, Yellow Pearls
Phantoms		Phantoms, Ghosties, Bottle Tops, Smudgies, Tor Bots, Fuzzies, Dusties
Redback		Redbacks, Spiders, Snake Eyes (USA)
Ribcage		Ribcages, Birdcages, Cagies, Floweries, Ferris Wheels
Sky Blue		Sky Blues, Toothpastes, Tidal Waves



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TYPE OF MARBLE		NAMES COLLECTED SO FAR
Snowball		Snowballs, White Pearls, Pearls
Spaghetti		Spaghettis, Brains, Mazes, Honey Suckers, Swirlies, Storms, Spiders (W.A.), Onions (Nth Qld), Spaghettis (Kenya)
Spearmint		Spearmints, Swirls
Speck		Specks, Speckled Eggs, Scrambled Eggs (Tasmania), Birdshits, Pizzas, Speckles, Spotted Craters, Speckled Moons, Moonies (black ones – Tasmania 1989), Speckledys, Duck Eggs, Crystals (Frankston, Vic.), Polka Dots, Stardusts, Disco Balls, Dinosaurs
Steely		Steelies, Ball Bearings, Barbarians, Silver Moons, Shots (Cairns, Qld), Steelies (Bahamas), Marios, Metals, Cannonballs (USA)
Swirl		Swirls, Swirlies, Swizzles
Tarzan		Tarzans, Swirls, Lightnings
Tiger's Eye		Tiger Eyes, Spiders, Half Moons
Turtle Shell		Turtle Shells (manufacturer's name), Melons, Spiders
Vampire		Vampires, Draculas, Lavas, Bloodsuckers, Red Eyes, Bloods, Raspberry Ripples, Red Genies, Red Rubies