**PLAYING THE ARCHIVE**INTERIM CONFERENCE

Lecture Hall Room, British Academy  
26 October 2018, 9.30-15.00

9.30-10.00 **Coffee**

10.00-10.30 **Playing the Archive: cultural memory, inter generational play, and merged reality**Andrew Burn

Playing the Archive is an ambitious programme of research and cultural production, exploring the nature of play by bringing together archives, spaces and technologies of play, along with people who play, both old and young. We are examining how the Opie archive of play from the 1950s and 60s can be re-presented to today’s players, educators and scholars in a variety of digital formats, including an online catalogue and digitised images and innovative mediations installed in museums. We are also exploring and creating spaces of play in the urban environment, as well as conducting new ethnographic studies of today’s playgrounds. The emerging dominant themes include memory, nostalgia, continuity and change, and the structures of time and space within which play (and Childhood more generally) follows its course.

10.30-11.00 **Principle and Practice in the ‘modest, unsponsored, and wholly voluntary survey’ of Iona and Peter Opie**  
Julia C. Bishop, Catherine Bannister, Alison Somerset-Ward

Despite public and scholarly acclaim for the Opies’ joint publications on the folklore of children (1959, 1969, 1985, 1997), some reviewers are critical of their approach or uncertain how to interpret their findings (e.g. Bernstein 1960, Messinger 1964, Grugeon 1988, Hardman 2001). The Opies have also been criticised for not writing in greater detail about the methodology which underpinned their publications and for not publishing their questionnaires (Legman 1979, Hobbs and Cornwell 1991).

As part of the Playing the Archive project, the first 31,000 pages of the Archive of Iona and Peter Opie have been digitised by the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. These enable close-up scrutiny and a more thorough appreciation of the Opies’ working methods than has hitherto been possible.

In this paper, we will examine the Opies’ survey work, which forms the bedrock of their research into children’s play and folklore, focusing on the questionnaires and a selection of the Opies’ correspondence with the teachers involved. We describe emerging findings and raise questions about the extent to which their status as ‘researchers beyond the university walls’ (Finnegan 2005), and the collaborative ethos they adopted, impacted on their work. These will be discussed in relation to the Opies’ own writings about their aims, approach and methods. We aim to round out the account of the Opies’ research and enable a more informed evaluation of it, as well as refining understandings as to the nature of their data and its potential for interpretation.

11.00-11.30 **Lifting the Lid on a Box of Delights: A Playful Material Interpretation of the Archive of Iona and Peter Opie**

Alison Somerset-Ward, Cath Bannister

Iona and Peter Opie began researching the living folklore of childhood with a letter to the Times in 1951, asking for ‘assistance in... collecting the oral lore of schoolchildren…’ They went on to establish a network of correspondents – predominantly school teachers – who distributed what the Opies termed their ‘suggestionaires’ to thousands of children across the UK. The result is a vast collection of working papers documenting children’s songs and rhymes, games, vernacular language and custom, now deposited at the Bodleian Libraries. Some of these papers have been digitised and are currently being catalogued at the University of Sheffield as part of Playing the Archive. They offer an insight into children’s cultural worlds during the mid-to-late twentieth century while standing as a testament to the durability, diversity and adaptability of tradition. This data arguably transcends the page through the rich, lively child contributor descriptions of their games, playthings and environments both spatial and temporal.

For this multimodal presentation, we have been Inspired by artists such as Joseph Cornell, George Maciunas (Fluxus) and Joe Tilson. We invite you to engage with the Opie Archive rendered as a tangible ‘Box of Delights’, referencing the Opies’ use of archive boxes to house their collection. This interactive box represents extracts from children’s contributions, categorised here as relating to Space, Lore and ‘Things’. Moreover, it demonstrates the interconnectedness of children’s play practices, whereby objects, surroundings and lore intersect, opening up fresh possibilities.

This piece encourages us to discover our own ways of interacting with the Opies’ data. There are no rules, although players may be guided by quotes drawn from children’s contributions explaining how they played, how space was used, and how lore and language directed and described their play-worlds. Each interaction between player and box will be unique, just as play is unique to the moment and to the players. Items may be used in conjunction or separately, and players can add their own ‘things’ to enhance a game or invent and share new games.

11.30-12.00 **Indexing the Opies**

Steve Roud

Nobody has come up with a satisfactory solution to the problems inherent in constructing a classification scheme for children's games and lore. I suggest that many problems would be solved, and better access created for interested parties, if we adopted more of an 'indexing' approach.

12.00-12.45 **Lunch**

12.45-13.15 **Meshwork, Playlines and Palimpsests: A Tracing of Play over Time**Jackie Marsh, Julia Bishop

This paper presents an analysis of children's play over time in one primary school playground. Drawing from data collected in two separate studies conducted over a nine-year period, an account is presented of the continuities and discontinuities of play as it is instantiated across space and time. It is argued that these two areas are inseparable in any study of children's play, and that theories derived from social anthropology and new materialism can inform an understanding of the dynamic between children and their playground environments across both dimensions. Implications for future research in the field are outlined.

13.15-14.00 **Dynamic Multimodal Methods for Researching Remediated Play**John Potter, Kate Cowan

In their studies of children’s play throughout the 1950s-1990s, folklorists Iona and Peter Opie aimed to capture the ‘kaleidoscopic vitality’ of UK playgrounds through extensive written observations, surveys and audio recordings of play (Opie, 1993). The ethnography strand of Playing the Archive builds on this work through undertaking contemporary studies of primary schools and making use of multimodal methodologies, including digital tools, to explore the nature of playground play today.

The first part of this presentation will discuss the participatory research methodology used in Playing the Archive for researching play, including the children’s creation of audio and audio-visual media recordings, drawings, maps and written texts of their games and imaginary play. Particular consideration will be given to the use of digital tools, including wearable GoPro cameras, 360 degree video and iPads, considered in terms of the potential they offer for capturing the ephemeral and multimodal nature of children’s play from new perspectives.

The second part of the talk will explore how these methods are allowing us to focus closely on the detail of the lived experience of the children and to analyse data which is rich and redolent with the changed ways in which meaning is made in the digital age. We will discuss, in particular, how the children’s games are remediating popular cultural reference points, such as those derived from gaming and YouTube, alongside unpacking continuities with childhoods of the past. YouTube in particular is arguably emerging as a hub for digitally mediated meaning and play, as a central part of a media ecosystem. We welcome feedback on all of these issues from fellow researchers and the advisory group.

Reference: Opie, I. (1993). The People in the Playground. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

14.00-14.30  **Interface Archaeology**Duncan Hay, Valerio Signorelli, Andy Hudson-Smith

In *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Benjamin Bratton defines an interface as ‘diagram plus computation’: an ‘image [that] can be used to control what it represents.’ (Bratton 2015, p. 220). That is, an interface, be it physical or digital, offers a representation of data structures in ways which enable users to act on and through them. Following Bratton, interfaces therefore aren’t ‘masks’ for more fundamental processes: as representations which act, they both produce and mediate those processes. As such, the affordances of an interface shape the way in which its underlying data structures can be acted upon; moreover, its design shapes the ways in which a user conceptualises that data. In this sense, interfaces are ideological, yet as with any representation, there is no unmediated access to the real that they depict.

This paper draws on preliminary learning from ‘Playing the Archive’, an EPSRC-funded research project exploring the affordances offered by Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies for capturing, preserving, and replaying the children’s games recorded by the folklorists Iona and John Opie. In it, we describe our initial experiments with re-purposing old or obsolete technologies such as the rotary telephones for engaging people with the Opies’ work. In what sense do these sensorially-rich technologies constitute an ‘interface’ to memory? How do different interfaces articulate a relationship between past and present? And what forms of knowing about the past might their formal properties facilitate?

14.30-15.00 **Children’s Calendar of Play: streets, sweets, kisses and cakes** Helen Woolley

Informed by Iona and Peter Opie (1959) The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren. Oxford University Press.

‘Special wildness and exuberance has been tolerated at certain festivals of the year’ (p232).

For children many activities through the seasons of the year were identified by Peter and Iona Opie as being adult initiated, not child initiated: what we now term as expressing children’s agency. However the Opies did also identify seasonal activities which were child initiated. Many such seasonal activities took place in roads and streets which are important and often overlooked urban spaces that provide connectivity between the daily, weekly and seasonal activity centres of life. As far as adults are concerned roads and streets are for travel and transport. They were and are not designed for play. However, urban open spaces can be used for a function that is different from the intention of the designers or managers of the open spaces by supporting affordances (Gibson, 1966) for activities. It is some of these affordances of roads and streets that children found in different seasons of the year that this presentation will begin to contemplate.