

children's autonomous lives, even though he writes on page 4 that 'children must be seen as active in determining their own lives and the lives of those around them', an assertion which he attributes to James, Jenks and Prout's 1998 book *Theorizing Childhood*.

Chapter 7 in Heywood's *History* seems to offer more promise, in his section on 'Mixing with the peer group', which includes a discussion on youthful gangs, and their influence on the behaviour of their members. It also includes a sub-section on 'Games and entertainment'. Heywood has used Bruegel's 1560 painting of *Children's Games* on the cover of his book, but although he acknowledges the antiquity of the games depicted, Heywood is clearly uncomfortable about what he calls 'the pleasing notion of a particular "culture of childhood"' and cautions that *There is a danger here of pushing the young into a ghetto, ignoring the fact that from the very beginning they acquire their language and patterns of thought from adults* (p 112).

Folklorists would dispute that children's folk culture represents a 'ghetto', and I would contend that children's folk culture simply represents one of the overlapping cultural milieus in which children take part. Children also belong to the family, the school, the peer group, and the social class, region and nation to which they belong; their often-undervalued folk culture can have a key role in children's overall socialisation.

Heywood has written (p 112) that a study of children's 'tribal' play culture requires the historian to behave like an anthropologist, and he is right. Anyone wanting to write a book about 'children and childhood' needs to recognise that more than the traditional skills of the historian are needed, and although researchers cannot conduct field work among children of past eras, they would be well advised to spend more time with children of the present day, in particular, in the school playground.

One of Heywood's conclusions I most appreciate is that debates on the nature of children and childhood have taken place throughout history, at least from mediaeval times, and do not belong only to the mediaeval era. In Chapter 3, he outlines centuries-old concerns and debates: depravity versus innocence, nature versus nurture, independence versus dependence. He makes clear that issues concerning gender and age, and the dilemmas they pose, are not yet over. Readers of the book will appreciate Heywood's last line: 'one should never underestimate the power of a child'.

■ PLAY AS DISCOVERY

June Factor

While Director of the Australian Children's Folklore Collection, June Factor was asked by Museum Victoria in 1995 to write a consultancy report on the Children's Museum to be created in its new building. June had been previously involved in the development of the Children's Museum in the 1980s, including one of its most successful exhibitions, 'You're It!', a hands-on exploration of children's traditional games.

The following is an extract from that report.

PLAY AS DISCOVERY

The central utility of play as a means of entering and integrating experience is an



You're It! Exhibition, Children's Museum, 1988.
Australian Children's Folklore Collection,
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assumption that dominates the theory and practice of children's museums. An activity of enormous complexity and variety, play suffers from an excess of (sometimes competing) definitions. Most theorists agree that play has certain distinctive characteristics. It is generally a voluntary activity, an experience entered into for its own sake, not for adult-styled 'useful' ends. It operates outside the boundaries of the 'realism' of everyday life, according to its own, agreed-upon rules. All things that can be imagined may be undertaken in play: 'In play, behaviour, while functioning normally, is uncoupled [and buffered] from its normal consequences... Therein lies both the flexibility of play and its frivolity.'¹ Play offers the young, the small and the powerless an authority and freedom unthinkable in non-play life. It is 'an arena of choice in many contexts where life options are limited'.²

Piaget's interest in play as a crucial form of adaptation of behaviour, and the essential mode of learning in early childhood, together with the work of many other psychologists in this field, have undoubtedly influenced children's museum practice.³ The old aphorism that play is children's work has been adapted to the notion that learning through play will make that process pleasurable.

Sometimes play seems to be viewed as a sugar-coating for the less tasty pill of knowledge. The Louisiana Children's Museum's brochure 'invites anyone who is or was a child to play, to explore, and to investigate. The museum gives free rein to inquiring hands and minds, and it cultivates curiosity. The Louisiana Children's Museum is a dynamic environment where children and their families learn together by having fun together.'⁴ The Santa Fe Children's Museum's publicises its exhibits: 'beckoning children to discover, to play, to question, and to find things out.'⁵ In Venezuela, the Children's Museum of Caracas sees itself as 'the laboratory lacking in the schools, the place where children learn while having fun.'⁶ One of the most prestigious of all children's museums, the Children's Museum in Boston, explains:

*our environment is informal, but our purpose is serious. Central to our philosophy is the belief that real objects, direct experiences and enjoyment support learning. To involve all kinds of learners we use a variety of strategies and programs... At the Children's Museum, children have fun, and children who are having fun are open to learning.'*⁷

According to the enthusiastic author of *Doing Children's Museums*: 'Essentially, children's museums are learning playgrounds, full of choices that encourage visitors to pursue their own interests as far as they want.'⁸

By no means all children's museums support this last, rather simplified view. Despite their rhetoric,⁹ most in practice appear to know the kinds and range of learning they wish to impart, and utilise experiential and playful methods to achieve goals that would certainly be acceptable to more formal institutions such as schools and traditional museums. The Boston museum has a comprehensive 'mission statement' and includes among its treasures cultural and natural history collections. In San Francisco, the internationally renowned Exploratorium, established in 1969 by a professor of physics, allows visitors to undertake what its founder called 'a library of experiments' to discover for themselves - or with the help of 'explainers' - fundamental laws of science.¹⁰



NEGLECT OF CHILDLORE

Perhaps because of its concentration on learning through discovery, the children's museum has not generally been a site for the exhibition or exploration of childlore. The intellectual grounding of these museums may be various, but it rarely extends to the inclusion of research and theory in the field of children's own traditions of play, language and ritual. In this neglect the children's museums have merely reflected a wider institutional silence.

The study of childhood has been relegated in the 20th century to the spheres of paediatrics, psychology and pedagogy. Consequently, the lives of children have not featured in culturally and socially important centres such as museums, other than as part of anthropological exhibits and in more recent times as a significant component of the museum clientele. The children's museum, although revolutionary in its re-characterisation of the role and function of museums, has continued to view children more as learners of adult-devised information than initiators and creators of their own.

As a result, there are very few children's museums that concern themselves with the lore and language of children, those 'accumulated traditions...inherited products and practices'¹¹ which mark out the young in all cultures as participants, conservers, adapters and inventors of linguistic and kinetic play.

What a scholar has called 'the triviality barrier'¹² is another explanation for this neglect. In the pragmatic, educationally hierarchical and often instrumentalist societies which typify what is known as the 'developed' world, it is difficult to take seriously the repetitive, seemingly absurd and non-functional play of the young. Museums, like schools, value order, clear categorisation, learning which has as its goal increasing competence in intellectual, physical or social 'performance'. Children's museums insist that play - carefully stimulated and channelled by knowledgeable adults - will help children achieve these goals. 'Children's museums create numerous participatory exhibits to help children understand the world in which they live through delightful play.'¹³

But even in a setting which reveres play, few (other than preschool educators) recognise the developmental utility for a child of pretending to be a fairy, playing Tag, speaking Pig Latin, or chanting:

*Mary had a little lamb
Her father shot it dead
And now it goes to school with her
Between two chunks of bread.*

Such behaviour may be considered a little wild; it is not easily controlled, does not defer to adult priorities, and rarely finds a place at the centre of the museum culture.



IMPORTANCE OF CHILDLORE

Lost to the museums by this marginalisation of childlore is the opportunity to study a central feature of child life. As I have written elsewhere, child-initiated play is the medium and the message, the evolutionary mechanism by which the young of our species make sense of a bewildering world without danger to limb or reputation. Safely anchored in what one theorist has defined as the 'third area' between the external world of objects and people, and the inner world of dream and thought,¹⁴ children creatively and imaginatively explore their own experience, and look with a quizzical eye at the universe of adults that surrounds them...

Children together, in the collaborative interaction of play, enhance the communicative possibilities of each individual child.¹⁵

Through traditions of play, children are able to move outside the limitations of the immediate moment, the here and now, the status of smallness, weakness, ignorance and powerlessness. Theirs is no mere imitation of adult life, or practice of skills useful in the distant future. These engagements of mind, heart and imagination are forms of creative invention built on tradition. Everything is possible in play - if the rules allow it.

In its own way, the playlore of childhood functions for children as the arts do for adults: the flux and chaos of life is temporarily ordered, given form and pattern and meaning. Robert Louis Stevenson understood this when he wrote: 'Fiction is to the grown man what play is to the child: it is there that he changes the atmosphere and tenor of his life.'¹⁶

One facet of childlore is play with toys. Although often presented without historical and cultural context, toys are familiar objects in children's museums. Many include toys as playthings, and facsimiles of 'olden times' toys may be used as historical artefacts. Collecting or exhibiting play material is another matter. Determined not to be associated with a parallel institution, sometimes called a Museum of Childhood, where children's playthings and the paraphernalia of well-to-do nurseries are displayed, a number of hands-on museums refuse to engage in a practice they regard as narrow and static.¹⁷ In the words of an Australian children's museum director, 'relatively uninterpreted collections of adult-made "childhood" artefacts drawn overwhelmingly from a narrow spectrum of society may serve only to reinforce inadequate or wrong stereotypes regarding a small aspect of the life of young people.'¹⁸

A few children's museums, such as the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia - the first American museum to specialise in children under the age of 8 - have moved beyond the toys/no toys polarity. Here



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the staff has recognised the intrinsic importance to an understanding of childhood of a scholarly approach to the world of children engaged in their own self-directed play.

In 1985, the Please Touch Museum presented an unusual exhibition: *Children's Play: Past, Present, & Future*. Intended as a project to 'illustrate the history of children's play in the Delaware Valley', the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue equally surprising: instead of the customary annotated listing of items in the exhibition, this catalogue contained a series of short essays by leading specialists in the history of childhood and children's folklore. The editor of the catalogue, Brian Sutton-Smith (then both Professor of Education and Professor of Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania), used his final comments to point to the dilemma facing those who would harness play for their own - adult - purposes:

[T]here is a common romantic assumption that play is functional and is always worthwhile. At the same time, adults are in general so scared of it that, unless it is called 'game simulation', or 'adjustment', or 'cognition', or 'problem solving', they would rather have nothing to do with it. By calling all of a child's intelligent activities 'play', the modern generation of educators and psychologists manages to suppress play on behalf of education and supervision.

Present trends indicate that there will be much more of such usurpation of play's potential to go wherever the players want to take it...¹⁹

As their own contribution to documenting and studying the patterns of children's play, the board of the Please Touch Museum established a Childlife Center within the museum in 1987. Determined that the museum would 'increasingly become known as a centre for research and study of American childhood',²⁰ the Executive Director persuaded the association of toy manufacturers in America to donate the most popular toys each year to the Center, while continuing to add historical material to an existing collection of objects, including home-made and child-made play artefacts, and audio tapes of childhood memories.

As a result, a children's museum which started, like so many others, as a lively, interactive, hands-on learning centre based on Piagetian principles, has begun a deliberate evolution into something more: a significant institution in American cultural and intellectual life, and one of the few to take the experiences of childhood seriously. A by-product of this development - and one which the museum consciously sought - is to 'speak directly to [their] adult audience who constitute some forty percent of...visitors.'²¹

The Children's Museum in the Museum of Victoria followed a similar trajectory when it determined that its second exhibition would focus on the play cultures of childhood. The first exhibition, *Everybody*, opened in 1985 and was acclaimed for its originality and accessibility to the young. It explored concepts of the human body through sculpture, 'touch and feel' exhibits and a variety of imaginative activities for children. *Everybody* is an example of a first-rate interactive exhibition which fulfilled one of the Children's Museum goals: to present 'high quality and enjoyable activities for children which stimulate them to discover the [natural] world'.²²

You're It!, which opened in 1988 and benefited from the talents of *Everybody's* designers, Mary and Grant Featherston, was developed from a quite different perspective. A rare instance of a children's

