Abstract
The documentation and institutional collection of Australian children’s play activities provides fascinating insights into the everyday cultures and practices of children, and by extension, of the broader social world that they inhabit. Detailed observational studies of children’s play in Australia date from the 1950s, and demonstrate how the dynamics of continuity and change within traditional playlore may reflect broader cultural and social influences on the play lives of children, including such factors as consumerism, popular culture, national and community histories, and geography. There is a diverse historical and contemporary material culture associated with play, ranging from knucklebones to swap cards to electronic devices. There are also intangible aspects of play cultures, such as skipping and chanting games, spoken and sung words, stories and physical movements. However, in practice, children’s play consists of the fluid interaction between such tangible and intangible forms. This paper argues that, contrary to international heritage frameworks that seek to distinguish between tangible and intangible heritage, the significance of everyday children’s play activities can only be analysed and understood as a holistic and living process.

Introduction: playlore and International Cultural Heritage frameworks
The documentation of Australian children’s playlore provides fascinating insights into the everyday cultures and social practices of children, whether in the schoolyard, the home, the street or the park. The complexities of the social, kinetic, cognitive and imaginative aspects of the cultures of childhood are largely centred around play practices. The evolution of these playways over time and across geographic and social locations attests to the inventiveness and innovation of children, as well as to a remarkable continuity of some traditional games. Yet play – and children’s cultures more generally – barely feature in recent literature examining the values ascribed to cultural heritages and the entwined processes of identity formation, whether this be at localised, national or global scales (Graham & Howard 2008).

The invisibility of children’s cultures of play as heritage may exist for a variety of reasons. These include the privileging in the historical record of adult experiences and activities over those of children; or the perception that children’s play lives are highly individualised and located in the private sphere, rather than being of collective, public and national and/or global significance. In addition, there is the ephemeral and fleeting nature of playlore, the transient universal stage of childhood (everyone grows up) and the relative lack of social power that children possess. Even when the heritages of childhood are publicly recognised – for instance in museum displays – the experiences of children are most usually represented and historicized as simply adjunct to those of adults and families, or contextualised within the framework of government, educational and institutional policies.

Furthermore, internationally recognised attributes and definitions of heritage are often framed in distinct categories that may prove unhelpful when it comes to the analysis of playlore and its social significance. Since the post-Second World War period, UNESCO has sought to identify, protect and preserve world heritage for future generations, most notably through its adoption in 1972 of the international Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Heritage Sites. In that treaty, ‘cultural heritage’ was considered to be monuments, groups of buildings and sites that were of ‘outstanding universal value’. ‘Natural heritage’ was defined at the time as comprising natural features, geological formations and specific habitats for endangered flora and fauna, and natural sites distinguished by such qualities as beauty or conservation values.

‘Intangible heritage’ was not formally incorporated in the 1972 Convention, although UNESCO has long been attempting to list and protect, including with reference to issues of intellectual property and copyright, both threatened customs and crafts and their traditional practitioners. It was not until 2003, following years of discussion, that UNESCO formally adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This document is based on an underlying conception of cultural preservation that emphasises notions of ‘traditional’ folklore, and its importance as a marker of cultural diversity and sustainability. It broadly defines ‘intangible heritage’ as being within the domain of ‘oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle’, ‘performing arts’, ‘social practices, rituals and festive events’, ‘knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe’ and ‘traditional craftsmanship’.

The accompanying UNESCO Proclamations of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity successively passed in 2001, 2003 and 2005, have listed over 90 entries from 70 countries around the world. These entries encompass musical, performative and linguistic artistic expressions; festivals and associated cultural rituals and practices; objects and the ‘masters’ of their traditional forms of production; and the ‘cultural spaces’ of the natural and social environments where particular groups of people live. There is an emphasis on entries from developing and non-developing countries, and in particular on the cultures of ethnic minorities practiced ‘older ways’ of life that are ‘endangered by encroaching economic, technological and environmental change’. The ‘masters’ (whether individual or as a group) are, as the transmitters of cultural practices, seen to be as equally significant as the ‘masterpieces’ that they produce. This inventory, which is framed as being of global significance, has been subjected to various critiques on the basis, and the inherent bias, of its
selection. Indeed, the Masterpieces list is conceptually and materially underpinned by ‘ethnographic’ and non-Western approaches to a notion of folklore that is strongly associated with the past (Kirschblatt-Gimblett 2004).

Neither the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage nor the Masterpieces adequately account for the everyday (and indeed ‘ordinary’) heritage of children’s play – which occurs (albeit with some variations) in all communities, regardless of that community’s beliefs, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical location. Children’s folklore or cultural heritage is transmitted through two related, fluid and overlapping cultural and communicative processes. The first comprises the verbal and non-verbal knowledges that are primarily passed on by children to other children, and include playlore such as games, rhymes, jokes and taunts. The second incorporates folklore that is for and about children and may be passed on informally by adults, such as traditional songs, proverbs, games, stories, and sayings.

Regardless of any method of transference, all children’s cultural heritage has material and non-material dimensions, and in practice these are intricately bound together. For instance, a group of children may play a traditional game with a skipping rope, but this play comprises physical actions (two children turn the rope, while others move in and out of the rope’s sweep, and jump in time as the rope hits the ground), verbal lore (counting rhymes and chants) and a set of rules which may previously have been negotiated between all players. Imaginative play games can transform natural objects such as rocks, petals and feathers into ‘fairy gardens’ or might construct tree trunks, branches and mounds of dirt into a cubby-house or fort. The scholarly documentation of Australian children’s play (and of playlore in other settings) draws upon this holistic approach in its analysis of play ‘things’ and play ‘lore’, and in this sense any division between what may be classified as tangible and intangible heritage is an artificial one.

Documenting Australian children’s playlore

In 1954-5 the noted American folklorist Dorothy Howard visited Australia on a Fulbright fellowship, under the auspices of the University of Melbourne, to study contemporary children’s play customs and to collect information from adults about the play traditions of earlier generations (Darian-Smith and Factor, 2005). Howard travelled throughout the continent, and during that time she spoke and corresponded with parents, teachers, academics and students about children’s play activities. She also conducted observational fieldwork in no less than thirty-one schools, carefully documenting children’s play activities. She brought her into contact with a wide cross-section of the population, from those living in remote rural areas of Tasmania or northern Queensland to urban-dwellers in the rapidly industrialising and expanding cities of post-war Australia. In early 1955, Howard gave an interim stocktake of her findings, which indicated the richness of play customs that included:

…over 700 name games; descriptions of about 400 games; 175 autograph album rhymes; 50 rope skipping rhymes; 40 counting-out rhymes (seven versions of Eenie, meenie, minie, mo); the words for about 15 singing games (with music notations for eight); a few riddles, tongue-twisters, trick rhymes; hand, finger and toe rhymes; rhymes for taunting, swearing an oath, bouncing ball; and nonsense rhymes. All this is folklore – transmitted from children to children without benefit of printed book or adult sponsor (Howard 1955: 43).

In the 1950s, many Australian games and rhymes had precedents that dated back to the British Isles, and even further back to antiquity. Australian Dingo was the name of a game similar to British Bulldog, itself a version of Red Rover, which descended from many games of ancient origin (Howard, 1955: 46). Another local term for a well-known European game was Bushrangers and Miners. Howard found many Australian variations on the traditional game of hopscotch, including a distinctive Queensland diagram that resembled a raised house on stilts (Howard 1958b).

Adaptations to traditional games occurred not just in the ‘rules’, but in relation to the gender and age of participating children, the season when games were played, and the availability of play objects. For instance, Howard’s visit coincided with a shift in Australia to the mass production of plastics, which was to result in a corresponding move from dyed sheep’s knucklebones bones to plastic ‘jacks’ used in the game of Knucklebones (Howard 1958a). In Western Australia, Quandongs used indigenous seedpods in a game known in the northern hemisphere as Conkers and played with horse-chestnuts. But Howard also recorded counting out rhymes that incorporated the Disney animated characters of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, and children played Cowboys and Indians – indicating that they were drawing on wider points of reference than those present in their immediate social and geographical location. Indeed, as an American academic, she was particularly interested in comparing Australian playlore with that of American children, and in tracing the cross-cultural and global influences on play cultures.

She was also aware that in the 1950s, Australia (in common with the United States) was undergoing a transition from the older values and lifestyles of the pre-Second World War world, to a modern era of advanced industrial capitalism. The historical shift in play traditions was evident in Howard’s interviews with older Australians and her consultation of archival materials. Howard concluded that since the late nineteenth century many of the intricate rituals of verbal lore had gradually become shorter, and many games of skill had...
simply become obsolete or had been grossly simplified (Howard 1955: 43); aspects of modern play, it seemed, were conducted at a faster pace. Other play objects had disappeared completely. The homemade gambling device known as the Toodlebuck, popular with children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during Melbourne Cup week, was no longer in use in the 1950s — although children still organised playground sweepstakes, and laid bets with pennies, modelling these activities on the betting practices of Looking ahead, Howard foresaw that such factors as the encroachment by suburban development on open play spaces and parks, the emphasis on organised sports and out-of-school activities, and the escalating influences of modern consumerism, mass entertainment and the spread of popular culture — including television, introduced to Australia in 1956 — would lead to ongoing adaptations and innovations in children’s play activities (Darian-Smith 2005). Indeed, theses comments made during the 1950s by Howard and other commentators about the increasing restrictions on children’s ‘freedoms’ to play have been echoed regularly in every successive decade, and are a prominent lament in adult recollections of childhood (Cliff 2000).

Howard’s pioneering investigation constitutes the first and most extensive study of contemporary children’s playlore undertaken in Australia, and has provided a theoretical and experiential basis for subsequent research in the field. In subsequent decades, folklorists, educationalists and historians have added to the knowledge of children’s play, and have made an important international contribution to its collection (Davey and Seal 1993). Published in 1969, Ian Turner’s Cinderella Dressed in Yella was the first scholarly examination of children’s rhymes, attracting notoriety for its inclusion of childhood vulgarity. It was followed by a second edition (Turner, Factor and Lowenstein 1978), a handful of anthologies of children’s rhymes and games compiled by various scholars, and a comprehensive cultural history of Australian children’s folklore by June Factor, evocatively titled Captain Cook Chased a Chook (1988). In a parallel development, the historiography of Australian childhood from the colonial period, while not extensive, has also grown (for example, Kociumbas 1997). This has been most notably in the fields of educational and welfare history, including recent histories of the policies of Aboriginal child removal, and the oral testimonies of the Stolen Generations (HEROC 1997; Haebich and Mellor 2002).

Howard’s observatory fieldwork in school playgrounds provided unique data on the play activities of children, their own views about play and the ‘things’ that they played with: a unique snapshot of everyday life in the mid-1950s. This record of the ‘ordinary’ and informal playlore of children has since been supplemented by further playground studies, both wide-ranging and particular in their scope. In the mid-1970s, a large research project conducted by Peter Lindsay and Denise Palmer explored the physical well-being of children in twenty-one Brisbane primary schools, observing almost 5,000 children and describing and photographing 255 different games (Lindsay and Palmer, 1981). In 1984, Heather Russell conducted fieldwork in an inner-city, multicultural primary school in Melbourne and her detailed report (1986) emphasised the influences of immigration and cultural diversity on playground friendships and play activities. Other studies conducted during the 1990s documented play in schools in regional Victoria, and the historical and contemporary experiences of play among Aboriginal communities (Darian-Smith 2008).

Present work-in-progress on the ‘Childhood, Tradition and Change’ project, representing a research partnership between the Australian Research Council, three Australian universities, the National Library of Australia and Museum Victoria, is undertaking fieldwork in more than twenty primary schools throughout Australia. These include some schools that were visited by Howard, Russell and other earlier researchers, with the aim to provide a series of longitudinal case studies of play across six decades. Initial analysis reveals that that children’s games, verbal lore and imaginary play have altered in various ways over time, but nonetheless there is an extraordinary continuity in the ways that many activities which were first documented in the 1950s occur on school playgrounds today. These include counting-out finger rhymes, running and hiding games such as ‘Tiggy’ or the swapping and trading of objects such as cards, tokens and small toys. Through its written, aural and visual documentation and the acquisition of contemporary play objects, the ‘Childhood, Tradition and Change’ project is collecting tangible and intangible playlore to be stored for posterity in the national repositories of its two partner collecting institutions. This recognition of everyday Australian children’s playlore as being of national significance is relatively recent, and is indicative of the shifting frameworks employed by the heritage and academic professions in relation to defining and according social value to cultural heritage per se. But it also...
reflects more specific social and education preoccupations with the experiences of children and the stage of childhood in Western developed nations like Australia, and how children’s cultures have been and are influenced by ‘new’ forms of media, technology and consumption.

**Collecting Australian children’s playlore**

When Howard came to Australia in the 1950s, she found that Australian academics were sceptical about her interests. The field of folklore was scarcely recognised in Australian universities or academic circles, and the study of children’s play was seen as being of little importance in its own right. Many Australian adults assured Howard that there would be few traces of traditional games, rhymes and other lore remaining in the playground, thus displaying reactions similar to those received by the folklorists Peter and Iona Opie when they began their investigation of British children’s play at much the same time. In addition, in the 1950s there was little about children’s play in Australian libraries for Howard to consult, with the exception of some ethnographic accounts of Aboriginal children’s games (Factor 2005:13).

There is no doubt that within Australian museums, libraries and archives items relating to children’s culture are still mostly secondary to and subsumed within more general social history collections encompassing adult experiences. However, there have been important developments, especially in the last twenty years, in the institutional classification and conservation of Australian children’s playlore. This emerging trend in Australia to distinguish the heritage of children’s cultures from that of adults has been concurrent with international expansion in the number of children’s museums (that is, museums with displays and activities directed at an audience of children) and museums of childhood (museums that offer a record of children’s experiences), although these may not be mutually exclusive forms. It has also accompanied a small but steady international growth in the research on children’s play, as well as rapidly expanding academic interests in related areas including oral history, and studies of cultural transmission and reception and the practices of everyday life.

The two major repositories of children’s folklore in Australia are located at Museum Victoria and the National Library of Australia, and are among the most comprehensive collections of children’s cultural heritage in the world. The Australian Children’s Folklore Collection (ACFC) was founded in 1979 by noted Australian folklorists June Factor and Gwenda Davey, and was donated to Museum Victoria in 1999. The ACFC is vast, and covers playlore from the late nineteenth century to the present. Its holdings comprise of more than 10,000 card files, as well as photographs, audio and visual recordings, and other documentary materials.

The ACFC also incorporates two unique sub-collections. The Dorothy Howard Collection includes Howard’s meticulous original research notes, and preserves Howard’s descriptions of playground rhymes, taunts, and jokes as well as play objects and artefacts (Darian-Smith and Factor 2005). The Aboriginal Children’s Play Project collection preserves a sizeable oral history collection documenting the experiences of childhood within Australian indigenous communities across a fifty-year time span, and including many descriptions of play activities and games (Darian-Smith 2008).

As an indication of the increasing recognition given to the intertwined tangible and intangible cultural heritage of children’s folklore, the ACFC was the first Museum Victoria collection to be placed on UNESCO’s Australian Memory of the World register. Founded in 2000 under the auspices of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, this Australian register is one of sixty nation-based programs which are incorporated under UNESCO’s Memory of the World umbrella to promote and preserve the most significant documentary and archival heritage around the world. The Australian register currently lists thirty items deemed of outstanding national historical and cultural significance, including such emblematic objects as the ‘Endeavour’ journal of James Cook, the Victorian Women’s Suffrage Petition of 1891, and the watershed Native Title case manuscripts in the Mabo judgement (http://www.amw.org.au/index.html). The ACFC is the only nominated collection across all Memory of the World national registers to be primarily concerned with the documentation of children’s cultural heritage, suggesting that children’s lore is typically either not collected or not archived as a distinctive body of cultural and historical knowledge.

The Oral History and Folklore Collection at the National Library of Australia contains the nation’s second large and significant archive containing an historical record of folklore of and for children. The Oral History and Folklore Collection aims to document and preserve Australia’s oral culture and record the life stories of Australians, including many who have served in public life. Within these broad parameters, the collection holds numerous oral and archival materials relating to children’s playlore, as well as oral histories with adults which reflect upon the diversity of the experiences of childhood and play (Cliff 2000). It also features recordings of children’s games and rhymes, including in languages other than English (Davey 2006) and is actively collecting, through the ‘Childhood, Tradition and Change’ project many further examples of current children’s playlore.

**Conclusion: playing with Intangible Heritage**

In Australia, current research and the acquisition policies and interests of at least two major state institutions have ensured that, despite many limitations, more extensive documentation and collection of Australian children’s folklore is occurring than ever before. Even a cursory analysis of these materials illustrates
the remarkable variation in Australian children's play customs, preferences, and tradition and innovation across states, from community to community, and within every schoolyard. It also raises important questions about the cultural processes associated with the transmission and the reception of playlore. For instance, how do children, including those who have recently immigrated to Australia, come to ‘know’ the complex rules of games and rhymes? Certainly, as some children move between schools and locations, they transfer knowledge about games and play from place to place — but the transmission of children’s cultures is multifaceted and takes place on various levels, and remains a rich subject for future research.

The increasing institutional and academic recognition of the significance of children’s playlore is also tied to current government and educational reforms of the primary school curriculum, underway in the US and the UK as well as in Australia. Many issues are aired in these educational reviews: the rise of childhood obesity and how this can be tackled by physical education programs in schools; or the ongoing tensions between policy-driven and economic imperatives to meet certain academic benchmarks or ‘standards’ and maintenance of an inclusive curriculum that serves its immediate community of children, parents and teachers. The role of play, and the play environment in and outside the classroom, is central to such discussions. For instance, the increasing regulation of the school day or the prioritisation of organised sport over ‘free play’ or the introduction of behavioural guidance programs addressing peer bullying and encouraging social integration have had some influence (both negative and positive) on the ways that children communicate and play with each other. Current research indicates that school directives have altered certain forms of play: marbles, very popular up to the 1980s, are now banned in most primary schools for safety reasons; and there appear to be an increasing number of ‘forbidden’ games children play when the supervisory adult is not looking. But there are also many continuities in playlore, from the delight that children continue to take in uttering ‘rude’ rhymes, to the complex systems involved in trading objects, to games involving chasing and ball games.

International heritage frameworks that seek to distinguish between the tangible and intangible have the potential to place too heavy an emphasis on the distinctive components of everyday cultures. This can result in what Lourdes Arizpe has called ‘cultural trivialisation’, or the reduction of culture to a set of individual domains (2004). The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage – despite its aim to define non-tangible aspects of culture – acknowledges the ‘deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage’, recognising that these exist within the ‘processes of globalisation and social transformation’.

The observational studies and the institutional collections of playlore discussed in this paper demonstrate that the dynamics of continuity and change reflect broader cultural and social influences on the play lives of children, incorporating such factors as educational policy, consumerism, popular culture, global and national histories, community values and geography. Children’s play is both ephemeral and vernacular: games are fleetingly executed in constantly changing forms, as are the social interactions that they may facilitate. Everyday children’s playlore is best understood as cultural heritage that is both living and holistic, simultaneously comprising evolving innovations as well as drawing creatively on traditional playways.

References
Factor, J., 1988, Captain Cook Chassed a Chook: Children’s Folklore in Australia, Penguin, Ringwood.
Western Australian Folklore Archive, Curtin University, see home page http://research.humanities.curtin.edu.au/centres/folklore/wafa.cfm, accessed 13 May 2010.

Endnotes
1 The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emerged from and built upon earlier moves to safeguard cultural heritage, including the UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding and of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989; the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity of 2001.
2 A smaller designated collection of children’s folklore is located in the Western Australian Folklore Archive, based at Curtin University. See http://research.humanities.curtin.edu.au/centres/folklore/wafa.cfm, accessed 13 May 2010