



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Resurrecting the Dead: The Case of the 'Sappy Sodgers'

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Abstract: This paper describes an outdoor game played by children aged 6 - 12 years in urban areas of Scotland in the 1950s. It also describes some of the unfortunate conditions experienced by modern children in childhood despite the major technical and societal advantages in the last 60 years. The paper goes on to suggest some benefits of resurrecting the original game and it describes a possible re-fashioning of the game with a modern aspect. It concludes with some reservations and invitations to take the matter further.

Key words: Children, games, play, learning, outdoors.

1. Preamble

The work reported here is part of a small portfolio of research collaborations between the Centre for the Study of Natural Design (CSND) and Scottish Outdoor Education Centers (SOEC), a charitable organisation concerned with environmental and outdoor learning for children primarily between the ages of 7 and 12 years. It has five centres in Scotland and handles about 20, 000 children per annum. The aim of the work at SOEC, in addition to environmental learning, is to build capacity in young children for confidence, skills, teamwork and early citizenship.

This paper reports on a study at the early stages. Its future direction will depend on the response from others at this conference and elsewhere. It could, for example, develop into a full study involving historical, social, design and technical research. At the moment, the work is conceptual and the evidence comes primarily from the childhood experience of one of the authors (S.B.).

2. Introduction

Most new games for young children are designed by adults. Many are virtual games played on a computer, television or video screen and involve the children in sedentary, cognitive

activity, indoors and on their own. That some learning of a specific kind occurs in these situations is not in question here, but that important motor skills, social skills and team building are absent from virtual learning is. This is a relatively recent occurrence. For thousands of years, all over the world, children have created and played games, individually and collectively. Many of these games have a long tradition and include strong cultural and social skills. They are filled with enjoyment. They are usually noisy, vigorously active and played outside. The earliest games were often simple and played in natural surroundings using natural resources. As people migrated into urban centres, games continued to be played, adapted or created to embrace these new environments. Games often tended to mimic adult practices, use new technical appliances and reflect socio-political conditions.

So, why should an outdoor game, probably invented by children more than 60 years ago and played at that time, by what would now be seen as a disorderly 'bunch of ragamuffins' in the dereliction of post-war urban Scotland be of relevance to modern childhood? Surely the dramatic technical and cultural changes from the post-war period of austerity in the UK (Kynaston, 2007) to the current period of advanced technology and high living standards will have ushered such games into obscurity. The evidence appears to confirm this - there now appears to be a total absence of games like 'sappy sodgers'. However, all advances in society tend to lead to more problems and it is just possible that some of these problems may be ameliorated by the resurrection of an 'old' game.

3. The Problems of Modern Childhood

In a modern, Western developed society, children are better off materially than they have ever been and yet there is widespread concern about the commercial pressures they face, the violence they are exposed to, the stresses at school and the increased emotional distress. (Layard & Dunn, 2009; 1). Some of this may be exaggerated but their recent survey reveals the complexity of these interacting issues and confirms their manifestation in increased symptoms of emotional and behavioral difficulties (Layard & Dunn 2009). The report also concludes that, in order to flourish, children need loving families, friends, a positive lifestyle built on solid values, good schools, good mental health and enough money to live among their peers without shame (Layard & Dunn, 2009; 10). The New Economics Foundation has suggested that the following five 'ways' are essential to well being - keep learning, connect, give, take notice and be active. We believe that several of these 'remedies' can be manifest in group games of a physically active nature. For example, each game played is a new learning experience and when played as a group or team, the connections support and enrich activities in and beyond the game, in everyday

life. Physical games also ensure activity and exercise and can make the participants feel good. Play and games also foster trust (Seldon 2009; 58) and ethical learning and can be an important part of moral education. Play, games and sports of a physical nature are good for children's health. It is generally accepted that physical inactivity as a result of a sedentary lifestyle, leads to a progressive reduction in the capacity for physical exertion. Inactivity leads to poor cardiovascular function, weakness of muscles and reduced bone density. Because exercise also influences insulin release, glucose transport into muscle and glycogen synthesis, it also has an effect on the incidence of diabetes mellitus and obesity (Royal College of Physicians, 1991). The interactions and effects are complex and multifactorial and not yet fully understood, and whilst obesity might best be treated by dietary changes, there is also a place for exercise in its prevention. Exercise also has psychological benefits. Those who exercise regularly, claim to feel better for it. Although this feeling of being 'fit' is difficult to define, those who feel like this feel less depression, tension and aggression and have better sleep patterns (Royal College of Physicians, 1991). There is also social value in exercise when executed in small groups and communal surroundings. In 1991, the Royal College of Physicians pointed out that "Exercise is such a dominant aspect of a child's life that it should only be limited or prohibited when there is sound evidence that it is deleterious". They also conclude that, "Even though a child may not acquire defined skills in exercise-related activities, this should not preclude the fostering of enthusiasm, interest and participation in such activities. The habit of exercise is most beneficial when acquired young". The rest of this paper concentrates on the idea that the return of 'old' outdoor children's games, and one in particular 'Sappy Sodgers', can help fulfill many of the positive attributes of enjoyment, exercise, social skills and moral education currently missing from many children's activities.

4. Play, Games & Sports

Play is usually the foundation of most games and some games then become organized sports. All of these have an important place in culture and society. Play according to Johan Huizinga is "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within fixed limits of time and place according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life" (McIntosh, 1972, citing Huizinga, 1955). Aspects of this definition have been subjected to analysis by Roger Caillois and further re-examined by McIntosh (1972). Caillois for example redefined play, as an activity, as free, separate, uncertain, unproductive and governed by rules and make believe. In other words, play is a voluntary activity, executed in spatially and temporally limited conditions where the end result

cannot be pre-determined. It is unproductive in that it creates no new material goods and produces only the game itself. Games are recognized by their rules and can be readily distinguished from ordinary or 'real' life. Games therefore have a make believe characteristic often exemplified in what the children call them e.g. Sappy Sodgers. It is interesting to note that the Indo-European etymological root for game i.e. 'ghem' means 'to leap joyfully, to spring' and pre-literate man would have used 'ghem' in describing the behavior of humans and animals. In old Norse, 'ghems' meant 'to come together and congregate as a school of whales do'. Game (ghem, gems) has always been associated with the notion of an unrestrained animal (wild, free) and the movement of a leg in a bent or twisted position during a jumping or leaping motion as experiencing great joy (Avedon & Sutton Smith, 1971; 2). Such characteristics feature in the game of 'Sappy Sodgers'.

5. The Original Game of 'Sappy Sodgers' (As recalled by S.B.)

According to Opie & Opie (1969) this game is classified as a chasing game, collectively described as 'three lives' and popularly known in different parts of Scotland as 'Sappy Sodgers' (Aberdeen), 'Wounded, Dying, Dead' (Perth), 'Deadies' (Langholm) and 'Chipped, Cracked & Broken' (New Cumnock). It was particularly popular in Aberdeen and played regularly by one of the authors of this paper (S.B) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It is this experience that is recorded here.

The *field of play*, was a lane at the rear of the row of 'tenements' which gave access to and from the 'drying greens' which were there to serve the communal clothes washing facilities in the basement of the tenements (see Figure. 1 and 2). Six or seven families would occupy one tenement. This particular lane was about seven metres wide and forty-five metres long. It had one stop-end (i.e. it was not a through route) and it was accessed from another paved road which was also a stop-end. The boundaries of the two long sides of the lane consisted of stone walls about 1.5 metres high, irregularly penetrated by gate openings into the drying greens and by the ends of small buildings and air-raid shelters. The stop-end was formed by a high (3 metres approx.) corrugated ironclad framed wall with a large locked door giving access to a commercial property. The surface of the lane was unpaved dirt. The boundary walls were only a means of containing the game and preventing the ball from going 'out of play'. Only rarely did any child conceive of bouncing the ball intentionally off the boundary to gain a technical advantage in play although this would have been accepted within the rules. Spectators and 'victims' from the game sat on top of the garden walls calling out advice or passing derisive yet humorous remarks just like adults would do at a football match, then and now. All of this contributed to the social atmosphere of the game.

The *Rules* of the game were few and simple. The aim of the game was to end up with one child as the victor. The game could start with 6 to 16 or more players. The game began with all the players standing in a circle, legs apart and feet touching those of the adjacent players. A ball was thrown in the air in the centre of the circle and the first 'thrower' was identified by whose legs the ball went through in coming to a halt. When the thrower was identified everyone else scattered across the lane as quickly as possible. Thereafter the ball was always "in play" being thrown by a 'thrower' with the intention of hitting another player on the clothed part of the body. A player hit three times was deemed 'dead' and given one last free throw which, if successful in hitting another player, led to the resurrection of the original 'victim'. Sometimes all players had to stand still during a 'free throw' thereby making it easier for a player to be resurrected. At all other times, the 'thrower' had to do so from a standing position. There was no referee or umpire. Any disputes beyond the rules were resolved by the players. Such resolutions only lasted for the duration of the game being played. The game ended with a single 'victor' or when conditions prevented further play - bad weather, darkness or lost ball. The *equipment* consisted of only a ball, usually an old, discarded tennis ball with no rough, surface skin. The players usually came from the adjacent tenements and all attended the local primary school. They were commonly aged from 6 to 12 years and a game could have a mixed cohort of boys and girls although boys tended to predominate in the ratio of about 3:1. Girls who played were on average older than the mean age of the boys and were those who were able to match the boys in throwing and running skills, strength and aggression. The game tended to emerge spontaneously as an alternative to other commonly played group games (Opie & Opie, 1969). They were rarely pre-arranged and never set up as competitions with children from other areas. A game could last for several hours depending on the skills and endurance of the players.



Figure.1 the original field of play (lane 2009) viewed from the open end



Figure.2 the original field of play (lane 2009) viewed from the stop end

6. Resurrection: From Game to Sport

We now suggest, that despite the conditions which have led to the demise of the original game, its resurrection in the modified form could restore benefits to childhood health and sociality which may also counteract some of the problems of childhood previously discussed. To do so in a modern society probably means that the game will have to be more fashionable, involving new technologies and styling and indeed adding to the cost of preparing the child for the game. This, of course, is no different from any other modern versions of games and sports. In this case, to meet the requirements of more expensive fashions and to comply with health and safety regulations the relatively simple, child

controlled game might have to become an adult controlled sport, and what follows is a speculative description of what this modern sport might look like.

The *field of play* may be the same size and shape of the original but it will have been specially created in large public/private open spaces like parks etc. The new boundary walls whilst containing the game are now designed to contribute to play by deflecting the thrown balls for a variety of purposes, First, to catch a player off guard instead of using a direct throw and second in a throw-and-catch move to allow the 'thrower' to move into a better space. Such boundaries provide an interesting challenge for engineering and computer design research. The *ball* too, could be specially designed to reduced impact on the human body whilst maintaining aerodynamic characteristics to accommodate the attributes of a skillful thrower to impart spin like a bowler in cricket or a pitcher in baseball. Perhaps too, the aerodynamic characteristics of the ball could induce sounds in relation to its velocity. From a low pitched moan at a slow speed to a high pitched scream at a high velocity, this too, would contribute to the 'wild' aspect of the game. However, in order to comply with health and safety, the child's head would need to be protected and fashionable, lightweight headgear styled like that worn by American footballers, or downhill skiers would be appropriate. The penalty for this however, is that now that the head is covered it becomes a target area for scoring hits! The body covering too, instead of ordinary shirts and shorts could be body skins similar to downhill skiers and racing cyclists and with little imagination and technical skills could be designed to record 'hits' and display this on the headgear! The footwear would now be high quality 'trainers' or basketball boots or similar. As this equipment becomes more fashionable and expensive the game becomes more of a 'professional' and spectator sport and the rewards become more extrinsic. Not all of this do we agree with but this may be necessary in the resurrecting and re-branding of the game. Finally, whilst the original game was one of individuals playing to become the sole winner, through the skills of throwing, running, twisting, turning and sidestepping, the new game could also be a team game. It is clearly possible with a suitable number of players to have teams or pairs or individuals in the game. Indeed in a game aimed at reducing the number of players to arrive at a winner, it is possible to start with teams then reduce to pairs and then end up with individuals competing for the final winner. In this way, children not only learn co-operation and competition but in a complete game they learn co-optition and how to develop changing tactics depending on the mode of play i.e. individual, pair or group. Such a game now develops some cognitive capacity as well as physical skills.

7. Conclusions

We are aware that the transformation of the original game described could also be achieved by translation into an exciting virtual game and one of us (F.W.) would be interested to hear from anyone interested in doing so. However, the purpose of this paper is to encourage the re-design of an old game which will facilitate the re-enchantment of active play and games in the outdoors in order to stimulate exercise and enjoyment in voluntary activities. We also acknowledge that this 'new' game could have an indoor version. We would be interested to hear from anyone, academic or commercial, who would be interested in research and development of such a game.

Of course, our preference would be for the original game to re-emerge in its original form and for it to be played and modified by children for children and for it to remain as much 'play' as possible so that it is filled with enjoyment and friendship. We suspect however, that many of the conditions now necessary for the game to be played at all, will dictate that a new version which embraces fashion and technical advances is more likely. We would be happy to debate these issues further with anyone who is interested.

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