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WHAT SURVIVES THE SCREEN: CHILDREN'S VERBAL GAME FOLKLORE IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT ACROSS UZBEK, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH TRADITIONS

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Abstract
This article examines what is preserved and what is lost when children's verbal game folklore migrates from live social practice into digital environments. Drawing on a corpus of approximately 1,500 folkloric texts and a sociolinguistic survey of approximately 300 native speakers across Uzbek, Russian and English linguistic communities, the study identifies a fundamental asymmetry in digital transformation: rhythmic-formulaic structures and role-assignment mechanisms survive digital mediation with considerable fidelity, while embodied performance, ritual closing formulae and word-movement syncretism are systematically lost. Survey data reveal that internet-based transmission is highest in the English-speaking context (14%) and minimal in the Uzbek context (2%), corresponding to the widest memory-to-use gap in the English group (35 percentage points) and the narrowest in the Uzbek group (24 percentage points). The article proposes a selective preservation model and draws implications for cultural heritage policy.

Keywords: *digital transformation; children's game folklore; internet folklore; structural invariant; transmission channels; Uzbek folklore; intangible heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

Children's verbal game folklore - counting-out rhymes, taunts, riddles, ring games and tongue twisters - has survived for centuries through a single mechanism: one person shows another how to play, and the genre passes on. Today, this mechanism faces a profound challenge. The smartphone, the short video, the educational website: these have become new vectors through which children encounter traditional game genres. The question that arises is not simply whether folklore survives in digital environments, but what of it survives, and what is quietly left behind.

This question matters beyond academic folkloristics. Children's verbal game genres are not merely entertainment: they are social regulators, linguistic primers, and carriers of cultural memory. The counting-out rhyme that appears to randomly assign roles is in fact a finely tuned social technology. The ring game that seems like a simple circle dance encodes ritual, seasonal symbolism, and communal values accumulated over centuries. If digital mediation preserves only the surface text of these genres while discarding their social and ritual dimensions, then what survives the screen may be the skeleton of a tradition rather than its living body.

The present article examines this question comparatively across three linguistic traditions: Uzbek, Russian and English. These three traditions represent distinct socio-cultural macro-systems at markedly different stages of digitalisation, making their

comparison diagnostically revealing. The study draws on a corpus of approximately 1,500 folkloric texts and a sociolinguistic survey of approximately 300 native speakers.

METHODS

The study combines corpus-based textual analysis with sociolinguistic survey data. The primary corpus (~1,500 texts) was assembled from authoritative sources across all three traditions: for Russian material - collections by V.P. Anikin and G.S. Vinogradov; for English material - the Opie corpus [1, 2]; for Uzbek material - collections by O. Safarov, Sh. Galiev, and G.A. Jahongirov [3, 4, 5], cross-referenced against Thompson's Motif-Index [6]. A supplementary digital corpus was assembled from publicly accessible social media platforms, children's YouTube channels and educational websites operating in all three target languages; these were coded for structural completeness and semantic content.

The sociolinguistic survey was administered to approximately 300 adult native speakers (~100 per language group), selected by purposive sampling on criteria of native speaker status and childhood experience of traditional game culture. Survey modules addressed genre recall, active usage, primary transmission channel (family / school / peers / internet), and exposure to digitally mediated folklore forms. The memory-to-use gap was operationalised as the percentage-point difference between recall rate and active use rate per group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What survives: structural resilience. The comparative analysis of digitally mediated game forms reveals a consistent pattern across all three traditions: the compositional skeleton of verbal game genres is markedly more resistant to digital transformation than their performative and ritual dimensions. The four-stage structural invariant identified in the full corpus - (1) formulaic opening; (2) counting-out and role assignment; (3) rhythmic main action; (4) closing formula and role rotation - is preserved in the overwhelming majority of digitally circulated forms. Uzbek chorlamalar and sanamalar appear on educational YouTube channels with their rhythmic structure intact. Russian counting-out rhymes circulate on social media in their recognisable metrical form. English counting-out formulas ("Eeny, meeny, miny, moe"; "Ip dip, sky blue") appear verbatim in online gaming contexts.

This structural resilience is not accidental. The rhythmic-formulaic features of verbal game genres serve a functional purpose that persists in digital contexts: they make texts easy to memorise and reproduce. The role-assignment mechanism of the counting-out rhyme retains its distributional logic even when reproduced as text or audio on a screen. These features survive because they are encodable without embodied co-presence.

What is lost: cultural vulnerability. Against this picture of structural resilience stands a consistent pattern of cultural loss. Three dimensions of children's game genres emerge as particularly vulnerable in digital environments. First, the ritual closing formula and role rotation mechanism - which in live performance ensures the cyclic continuation of play - is frequently absent in digital versions, where the formula becomes

a cultural quotation rather than a social mechanism. Second, the syncretism of word and movement, a defining feature of all three traditions, is systematically disrupted: the Uzbek formula "Igna-igna..." which triggers a physical catching action through sound loses its game function entirely on a screen. Third, the socio-pedagogical dimension - the function of regulating social behaviour and transmitting cultural norms - is substantially attenuated when the social situation of play is absent.

Cross-cultural differentials. Table 1 presents the survey findings on transmission channels and the memory-to-use gap across the three groups.

Table 1.

Transmission channels and memory-to-use gap by language group

Indicator	Uzbek	Russian	English
Family transmission	~85%	~78%	~58%
Internet transmission	~2%	~5%	~14%
Genre recall	~88%	~82%	~75%
Memory-to-use gap	24 pp	27 pp	35 pp

The most striking finding is the inverse relationship between internet transmission rate and active use rate. The English-speaking group, with the highest internet transmission rate (14%), has the lowest active use rate (40%) and the widest memory-to-use gap (35 percentage points). The Uzbek group, with the lowest internet transmission rate (2%), has the highest active use rate (64%) and the narrowest gap (24 percentage points). This inverse relationship directly contradicts a simple continuity thesis - the assumption that digital transmission straightforwardly extends genre vitality - and instead supports what may be called the decoupling hypothesis: internet transmission preserves structural genre text but does not sustain the embodied social conditions of active genre practice.

The Uzbek tradition's strong family-based transmission (~85%) reflects a combination of factors: the persistence of extended family household structures; the cultural valorisation of oral tradition reinforced by state language policy; and the comparatively recent urbanisation of Uzbek society. These factors constitute what may be described as a protective transmission ecology - one that buffers the tradition against the decoupling effect observed in the English-speaking context. This ecology cannot be taken for granted: the same urbanisation and digitalisation pressures that have widened the English gap are operating in the Uzbek context, albeit at a later stage.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that digital mediation does not simply extend children's verbal game folklore into new environments but selectively filters it. What survives the screen is the structural skeleton of genre: rhythmic formulae, role-assignment mechanisms, the recognisable metrical form. What is left behind is the embodied flesh

of genre: the word-movement syncretism, the ritual closing formula, the socio-pedagogical function that emerges from live co-present social practice.

Cross-cultural survey data confirm that this selective preservation operates differently across traditions. The Uzbek tradition, with its robust family-based transmission ecology and narrow memory-to-use gap, retains the strongest connection between genre knowledge and genre practice. The English-speaking tradition, where internet transmission has most substantially displaced family transmission, exhibits the widest decoupling between what adults remember and what they actively use.

For cultural heritage policy and education in Uzbekistan, the implication is clear: the current strength of family transmission is a resource, not a guarantee. Institutional support for living genre practice - in schools, community programmes, and early childhood education - is the most effective means of ensuring that what children encounter is not merely the skeleton of the tradition but its living body.

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