

Playful by Design



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Children's play has a rich history and takes near infinite forms. It's vital for their development, learning, self-expression and sense of belonging. It includes but goes broader than activities formally organised as games.

But even in relatively privileged wealthy countries, children are losing opportunities for play. Green spaces have been disappearing. Children are driven instead of walking to school. Free time is sacrificed to the demands of the school curriculum. Parents fear letting children play by themselves. Where play is supported, this is frequently harnessed to serve adult agendas, often commercial, but even when intended to benefit children's learning or health, for example, a consequence is that 'free play' – child-led, imaginative, voluntary, open-ended – is particularly under threat.

As children spend more time playing online, it is imperative to ask whether they can play freely in digital contexts? Most digital products and services where children play – or act playfully – are not designed with their needs and rights in mind; far from it. So, could the digital environment be better designed to enhance and not undermine children's free play? What, practically, can digital providers do differently?

The Digital Futures Commission seeks to answer these questions as part of an applied 'play in a digital world' research project aiming to embed children's rights in the digital world. In relation to play, we start not with computer games or social media but by going back to first principles – the qualities of free play and how to design both physical and digital environments to support them. We're intrigued that, still, most people think about free play as taking place in person, offline. A child playing creatively with a cardboard box puts a smile on parents' faces. Everyone loves to recall their own childhood play outside, with muddy knees and no eye on the clock.

While of course we need more and better access to playgrounds, parks, play streets and green spaces, we don't really know how to identify places for children's free play online. Do they, can they exist? What's the digital equivalent of playing with a cardboard box? Is it *Minecraft*, for instance, and if not, why not?

To answer these research questions, we used a mix of methods including literature reviews, expert interviews, public consultation and survey. Our literature reviews identified the prototypical qualities of child-led play or free play and the factors that shape children's free play possibilities. Our online

public consultation focused on children's playful experiences in both digital and non-digital contexts and play from the perspectives of parents, caregivers and professionals working with children. Our survey focused on children's evaluation of the qualities of play they experience and the digital features they encounter.

We heard loud and clear from children through our consultation and survey that children seek similar qualities of play wherever they play. From our survey, more children aged 6 to 17 found that play in the non-digital context was more diverse, stimulating, open-ended, imaginative, emotionally resonant and safe

than they did play in the digital context. These children also found greater sense of achievement when playing in a non-digital context than playing with digital devices. That said, more children found that play with digital devices offered social and immersive opportunities than playing in a non-digital context.

What works? From the statistical correlations between the qualities and features children reported in our survey, we begin to see which digital features enhance or constrain free play. We highlight seven design principles here. To claim the label 'Playful by Design', digital products and services should adopt seven key recommendations:

- 1 Be welcoming:** Prioritise digital features that are inclusive, sociable and welcoming to all, reducing hateful communication and forms of exclusion and reflecting multiple identities.
- 2 Enhance imagination:** Prioritise creative resources and imaginative, open-ended play over pre-determined pathways built on popularity metrics or driven by advertising or other commercial pressures.
- 3 Enable open-ended play:** Provide and enhance features that offer easy-to-use pathways, flexibility and variety as these support children's agency and encourage their imaginative, stimulating and open-ended play.
- 4 No commercial exploitation:** Reduce compulsive features designed to prolong user engagement or cultivate dependency on games, apps or platforms, so children's immersive play is intrinsically motivated and freely chosen.
- 5 Ensure safety:** Ensure children's play in online spaces is safe, including by giving them control over who can contact them and supplying help when needed.
- 6 Allow for experimentation:** Recognise that exploration, invention and a degree of risk taking is important in children's play and that the burden should not fall on them always to be cautious or anxious, or to follow rules set by others.
- 7 Be age-appropriate:** Respect the needs of children of different ages by providing age-appropriate opportunities for play, while also allowing for safe intergenerational play.

It seems that the more inclusive the digital environment is, the more intrinsic motivation the children have to play. Here, by inclusive, we mean welcoming and tolerant. This correlation also suggests that the voluntary nature of children's play is undermined by compulsive features that make it hard for children to stop playing even when children have had enough. So, designing mechanisms to help children wind down from their play would be sensible.

Providing digital products and services that are more inclusive, affordable, and with more targeted support for children when they encounter things that they find upsetting will also make children feel safer in their play. Last but not least, digital products and services that feature engaging design, but offer safe spaces, can encourage children's risk-taking or boundary-pushing play.

Our project addresses policymakers, designers and developers, for they have the power to ensure that the opportunities available to children respect their rights – to play, but also to expression, assembly, privacy, safety and more. In our interviews with children, we find they are intrigued by our proposal for Playful by Design and some of them have sought us out to ask what a rights-respecting approach would involve. But of course it can be tricky to make the digital environment fair for everyone to play in and that it can be challenging to provide for, for example, boundary-pushing play within safe parameters. So, now we are running workshops with designers to establish some good examples for these difficult balancing acts, and to create a design toolkit to promote Playful by Design in practice.

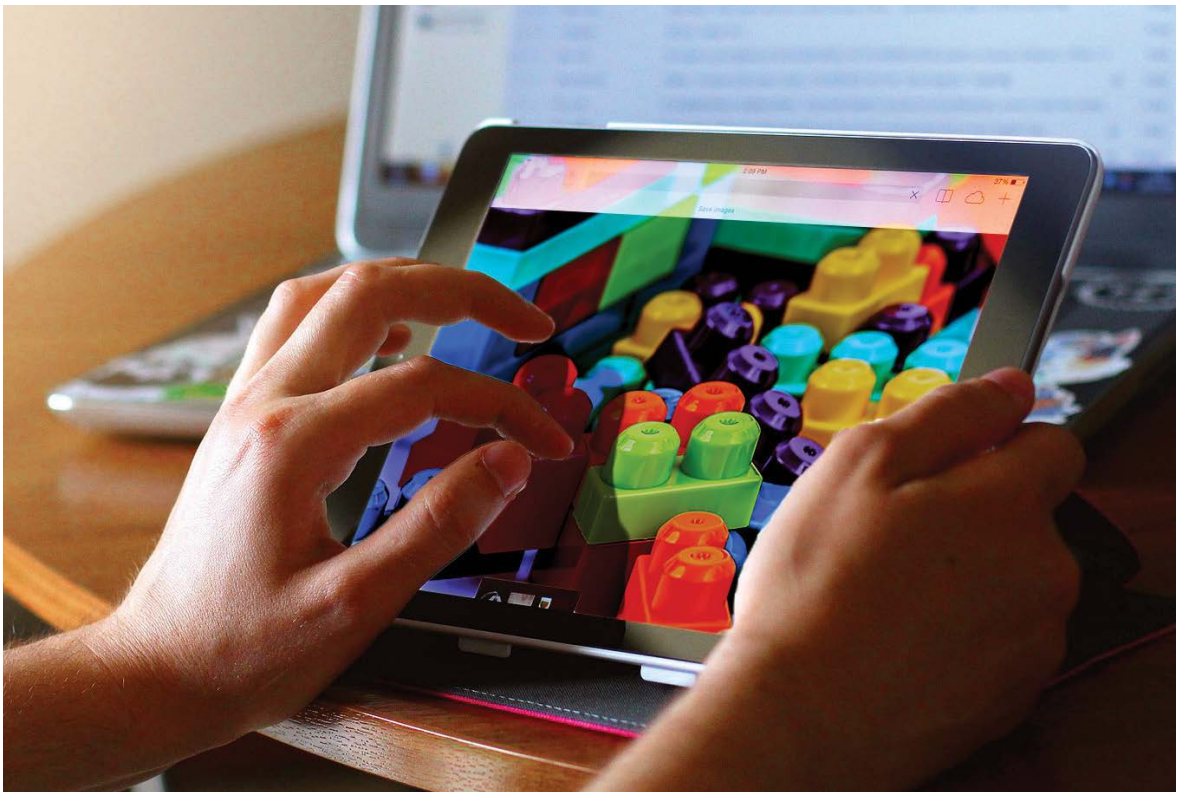


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