

PLAYING TO STAY CONNECTED

SONIA LIVINGSTONE AND KRUAKAE POTHONG

A surge in demand for online communication services during the Covid-19 lockdown is hardly surprising. Yet the range of inventive uses of digital technologies to stay connected with dispersed friends and families may stretch digital providers' imaginations!



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The Digital Futures Commission was established by the 5Rights Foundation to identify what good looks like for children in a digital world, and to embed children's best interests in the design of their digital futures. Having quickly learned how rarely children's views are sought, yet how vocal children can be regarding their rights in relation to the digital environment,¹ we held a public consultation on play during the winter of 2020-2021.²

Since COVID-19 meant people's lives suddenly became digital-by-default,³ we learned about a host of tactics invented by the 126 participants, half of them children and young people, half of them parents, carers or professionals working with young people, who joined our 28 lively online group discussions. This was a fortuitous time for our research, as the public, including children and young people, has had ample cause to reflect on the importance of digital technologies in their lives, including the challenges it brings.⁴

They have also had ample cause to invent new ways to survive these peculiar times, including creatively adapting digital technologies to serve their playful purposes. A mother and theatre practitioner told us:

"My eight-year-old was playing on Zoom... The kids... all have access to the screen, and they're sort of playing hide and seek or catch [or] tag, so someone has to draw; someone has to be the eraser."

THE SECRET GARDEN

A fourteen-year-old girl baked cake with her sister over WhatsApp to “connect” while living apart during lockdown. A family told us how they play quizzes as part of their “big zoom” session to “catch up” with relatives. A mother and daughter described playing “Scattergories” with their dispersed family via Zoom. An eighteen-year-old young woman combined Discord with Google Forms to create an “element of quizzes and trivia” when having fun with her friends. A pastoral school worker has been running various activities, including “Play-Doh”, “treasure hunt games” and “cooking” online as part of the after-school club.

In addition to integrating what originated as physical and tactile play into the digital environment, participants also brought play from the digital domain into their physical world. A sixteen-year-old girl from Cardiff reported mimicking the game mechanics of the online multiplayer social deduction game *Among Us* with her classmates in school. A Year 6 teacher wryly observed the transfer of digitally-originated fun to the physical playground in school:



“I think TikTok is the new skipping. All we ever see are children walking around doing these movements, and they all know the same movements.”

As young as nine years old, our young participants also reported adapting forms of online communication to coordinate their play on screens with their peers when playing games such as *Minecraft*, *Roblox* and *Call of Duty*. They adapted various communication tools and platforms, ranging from a simple phone to social media (e.g., House Party) and digital communication platforms, such as Discord, WhatsApp and Zoom, to support voice communication during gameplay. As a father of a nine-year-old girl observed:



“They build houses and interact with each other in whatever world they’ve generated. But then they’re also always doing it with a Houseparty, Zoom call type thing ... they can all talk to each other and play a bit. They’re using it as a means of social interaction at the moment.”


Irrespective of how families improvise using digital technologies for fun, two common qualities of play shine through – intrinsically motivated and socially connected.⁵ Playing to stay connected, especially during lockdown, means improvising digital communication platforms, such as Zoom and Google Forms that were designed for business use. But it turns out they can also enable traditional, physical and tactile play online if the players are

sufficiently intrinsically motivated. Lockdown play links friends and family together through common tasks, such as quizzes, world-building projects, or coordinating actions in digital games, and this in turn generates further conversations about their shared experience.

Seeking to stay connected through play during lockdown has diversified the forms of hybrid play well beyond the original design objectives of available digital technologies, including games. Such hybrid play does not require advanced technology such as the augmented reality of *Pokémon Go*. Participants in our consultation found their own ways to bring traditional, physical play like hide-and-seek or treasure hunts online. Through their imaginations, they opened up unforeseen opportunities for integrating physical, tactile playful activities into digital fun, and vice versa. In the process, they found a solution to the thorny problem of “screen time.”⁶



What conditions, then, are needed to cultivate these hybrid opportunities? The way our participants improvised digital technologies to satisfy the intrinsically motivated and social qualities of their play highlights three enabling features: communication, adaptability and hybridity. Digital communication features enable people to socialise during and after their play experience, especially when physical contact is limited. Adaptability refers to the design of digital products and services that make them more malleable for flexible use without changing their core functions. Hybridity connects playful experiences across multiple spaces and contexts of use.

So, how can we improve play in the digital environment? The range of digital communication tools and platforms used by our participants in their play suggests a healthy level of diversity in terms of communication channels and practices. However, participants called for more effective implementation of safeguarding measures, such as content, contact and conduct moderation and filters on the digital communication channels they use, and guidance on safety measures. They called for more flexible and adaptable design to enable them to negotiate their own interaction opportunities. These calls for change indicate that digital providers should prioritise safe, ethical and open-ended design, and leave the rest to people’s imagination and capacity to improve. 

[> Back to contents](#)

Endnotes

¹ Mukherjee, S. and Livingstone, S. (2020) Children and Young People's Voices. Digital Futures Commission. London: 5Rights Foundation. Available at <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Children-and-Young-Peoples-Voices.pdf>

² Livingstone, S. (2020) A consultation on play in a digital world launches the Digital Futures Commission. Digital Futures Commission blog, available at <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/blog/a-consultation-on-play-in-a-digital-world-launches-the-digital-futures-commission/>

³ Livingstone, S. (2020) Digital by default: the new normal of family life under COVID-19. LSE British Politics and Policy blog, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/digital-by-default/>

⁴ Pothong, K. (2021) Reimagining digital play: we want more sociability, hybridity and safety, with fewer tricky freemiums. Digital Futures Commission blog, available at <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/blog/reimagining-digital-play-we-want-more-sociability-hybridity-and-safety-with-fewer-tricky-freemiums/>

⁵ Cowan, K. (2020). A Panorama of Play - A Literature Review. Digital Futures Commission. London: 5Rights Foundation. Available at <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Panorama-of-Play-A-Literature-Review.pdf>

⁶ Livingstone, S. and Blum-Ross, A. (2020) Interview about Parenting for a Digital Future. LSE Review of Books. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2020/08/07/author-interview-q-and-a-with-sonia-livingstone-and-alicia-blum-ross-authors-of-parenting-for-a-digital-future/>