

Are children's lives all fun and games? No. So, we call for Playful by Design

By Sonia Livingstone and Kruakae Pothong

This year's Safer Internet Day theme on 8 February is "[All fun and games? Exploring respect and relationships online](#)," headlining [new research](#) showing that the pandemic has led to 77% of young people spending longer playing games and apps online than ever before. However, before we jump to conclusions about what this increase in time spent online means, let's reflect on the research we did for [Playful by Design](#), comparing the qualities of play children enjoy online and offline. This comparison shows that children enjoy both but also encounter problems with both. That said, offline play is still greatly preferred by children, and for good reason!

Although both online and offline plays are often discussed, they are rarely compared directly using the same measures. Our research challenges some common myths:

- that playing offline is as idyllic as adults' nostalgic memories of running free
- that children can't tell the difference between online and offline for it's all a blur to them
- and that children today prefer the digital to the real world

Children and young people who participated in our [online public consultation](#) and survey confirmed that these assumptions are inaccurate.



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We found that:

- Play matters for all those aged 3-17 (and older!) though teens may use different words (such as being playful, playing games, having fun)
- Playing online is now the most common form of play for 6-17-year-olds

- But while 73% said they agreed a lot that recently they had a great time playing in real-life, only 45% said this of playing in a digital context
- No wonder children told us that they want more opportunities for free play outside and with friends in person

To understand why play offline is better than play online, we compared the qualities of play that children report in both contexts:

- Children enjoy some of the same qualities of play online and offline: social, immersive and emotionally resonant
- But they find play offline better for its diversity, open-ended, stimulating, imaginative and sense of achievement, and there are no qualities of play that children enjoy more online
- Problematically, in both contexts, children report a lack of opportunities for intrinsic motivation, voluntary, safety and risk-taking – though these are vital qualities of free play for children’s development and wellbeing
- Important to note – especially on Safer Internet Day – online opportunities for play are significantly less safe than offline play

Children’s ratings on the 12 qualities of play, for play “in real life” and in digital contexts (% agree) (Base: 1033 6–17-year-olds)



Improvements are needed to the opportunities that society provides for play offline and online. The Digital Futures Commission focuses on the digital world – here, changes are required to policy, regulation and design. Safer Internet Day is the perfect time to call for more safety in children’s games online, as well as other digital services that children use for playful purposes.

By setting safety in the context of free play, we draw attention to multiple problematic features of game design – compulsive, datafied, age-inappropriate, hateful, and commercially exploitative, as well as highlighting what the features that children want more of – including ease of use, creativity, affordability and kindness.

In our research, in addition to problematising the current state of play online and offline, we also lay out a pathway for designing free play, informed by the experiences and voices of children and young people. Thus, we provide:

- A roadmap for *Playful by Design* for digital providers, designers and developers

- The results of a consultation with 126 children, parents and carers, and professionals who work with children
- Findings from a [national survey with 1000 children and young people](#) across the UK
- An analysis of what works – namely, the digital design features that can enable or undermine the 12 qualities of free play that children need and value
- 8 worked examples of the changes required now for [Fortnite](#), [Minecraft](#), Nintendo Wii, Roblox, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube, Zoom
- Two up to date literature reviews – on [free play](#) and [play in digital contexts](#)
- An analysis of how to advance [children's right to play](#).

Our Playful by Design proposal raises some knotty design challenges. How can we design immersive games that allow children the agency to disengage at will? Or how can we create risk-taking opportunities in digital play contexts yet within safe parameters? We are now running [workshops with designers](#) to learn how their actions can realise our [Playful by Design principles](#) and address some of these knotty issues. If you would like to get involved, please drop us a line at kruakae@5rightsfoundation.com.

We are blogging our work [here](#) and sign up [here](#) to stay in touch.

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