

# Let's play! Putting Playful by Design into practice

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Did you have a playful Christmas? The year 2021 was the year of Playful by Design at the [Digital Futures Commission](#) despite the COVID-19 gloom! We begin 2022 with designers' workshops to materialise our Playful by Design concept in relation to actual digital products and services.



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Anticipating the 2021 holiday season, we [launched](#) our [Playful by Design](#) report, detailing our vision of play in a digital world. We hoped that the report would inspire 'Santa' to send children toys and digital sources of fun that are:

- Welcoming to all
- Imaginative
- Open-ended
- Non commercially exploitative
- Safe
- Experimentative and
- Age-appropriate.

These principles of Playful by Design build on several research pieces that we have carried out throughout 2020 and 2021, starting with [A Panorama of Play](#). The report identified the qualities that make free play matter: intrinsically motivated, voluntary, open-ended, imaginative, stimulating, emotionally resonant, social and diverse. These qualities

of free play found our [critical engagement](#) with 126 participants, comprising children and young people, parents, caregivers and professionals working with children, about children's playful experiences in both non-digital and digital contexts.

From this critical engagement in our [online public consultation](#), we gained insights into their secret life of play, which revealed further four qualities – risk-taking, safety, sense of achievement and immersive – that make [free play matter](#) in a digital environment. Participants also told us how they expected the digital environment to enhance their playful experiences. Children and young people explicitly told us they want [more sociability, hybridity and safety](#). They also asked for fewer [tricky freemiums](#) in their digital play.

In parallel, we commissioned a literature review of research on play in the digital environment. The resulting [Kaleidoscope of Play in a Digital World](#) revealed how the interplay among people, products and places shape children's free play possibilities in the digital environment. The report highlights three key features: [hybrid, multi-sensory and communicative features](#) as key to enhancing imaginative, stimulating and social qualities of play in the digital environment.

In the Summer of 2021, we commissioned Family Kids & Youth to conduct an [online survey](#) with over 1000 children and young people aged 6 – 17 to further investigate how children play online and offline. We found that more children aged 6 – 17 had a great time playing 'in real life' (73%) than they did online (45%). Children's and young people's responses to our survey indicate that the digital products and services they engage with for fun, including but not limited to games, fall short on safety, risk-taking and voluntary play. 69% of our 6 – 17-year-old participants say they find it hard to stop playing even when they have had enough, while 45% state that their digital play can bother or upset them, and 44% report not being able to be naughty or break any rules when playing. To improve their playful experience in the digital environment, our 6-17-year-olds called for:

- More features that are easy to use (62%)
- More creative opportunities (58%)
- More age-appropriate features (58%)
- More affordable products and services (56%)
- More products and services without advertising (45%)
- Better control over who can contact them in the game or app (44%)
- More products and services that are kind, enabling intergenerational play and where people feel included (42%)
- Products and services that do not share their data with other apps or services.

Did any of these wishes come in any of the boxes over Christmas? Or did Santa struggle to find children digital products and services that are playful [by design](#)?

Do not worry if Santa couldn't quite wrap everything children wish for in your Christmas present. We have dedicated the first quarter of 2022 to running workshops with designers and developers of digital products and services to ensure that [children's rights to play](#) are realised 'in real life' as well as in the digital environment.

This will in turn feed our work on [play in a digital world](#) into the development of our [guidance for innovators](#). There we're building on Playful by Design and other [ideas of 'by design'](#) to guide innovators to recentre [children's best interests](#) in emerging digital innovations. So, stay tuned!

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Originally posted on <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/> on January 10, 2022 .