# Reimagining digital play: we want more sociability, hybridity and safety, with fewer tricky freemiums

By Kruakae Pothong

In our digital play consultation we are hearing from children and young people how they are finding ways to enjoy online the qualities of play that matter to them. They told us about everything from the classic notion of digital play – video games – to playing hide and seek and Scattergories via Zoom!

We are consulting 1) children and young people, 2) parents and carers, and 3) professionals working with children. Our aim is to understand why play is important to children and young people, what free play in the digital environment looks like, and how their digital play experience could be improved. Here we offer an early snapshot of what the children and young people are telling us.
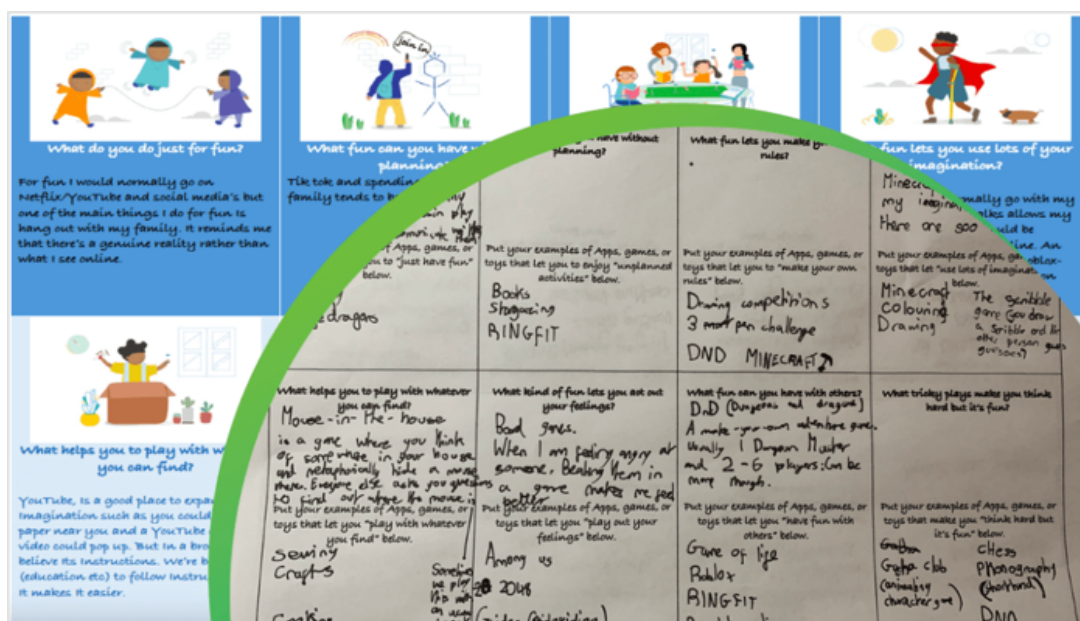
Participants completed a worksheet, mapping qualities of play with their playful activities.

Importance of play

Children and young people described their offline or outdoor play as being social, physical or tactile, imaginative, sometimes with a surprise twist.

> *"I normally have fun playing Stuck in the Mud. Because you have to tag someone. It's like tag, but you have to freeze instead of you're out … I get to enjoy playing with my friend."*
>
> *Girl, 8 years old*

Traditional games like tag or hide and seek resonated with many young people, and they especially emphasised how social interaction is an integral part of their play. Creative or imaginative play, and risk-taking activities followed in close behind.

> *"I really liked playing … and exploring in a fantasy world."*
>
> *Teenage boy, 15 years old*

These creative or imaginative qualities of play have a serious purpose – enabling children and young people to make sense of the world and take risks in exploring their own potential as well as adult boundaries.

Playing in the digital environment

When children and young people engage in digital play, they seek out similar experiences.

> "The thing I like about video games, specifically Minecraft, is that even though it's just one game, there's ton of different things you can do with your friends. And the realm that I've got gives me tonnes of free world maps, so I can download them and put them on the realm … On a game, I can do whatever I like pretty much and it won't affect what I do in real life."

> *Girl, 12 years old*
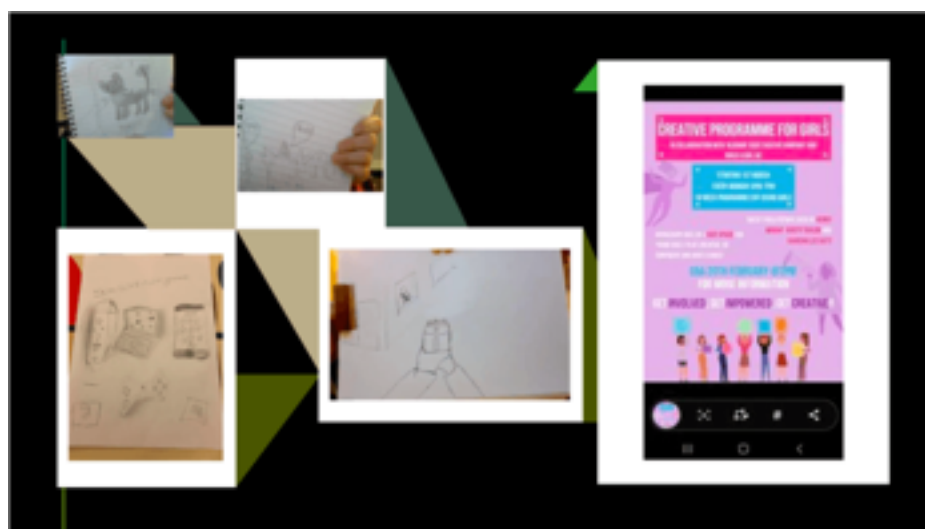
Participants shared their sketches or examples of their favourite digital play.

The way this girl describes her experience playing Minecraft reveals her perceived risk-taking affordance of a digital game which involves making or breaking rules. Indeed, many children and young people have told us how they appreciate the open-ended structure of certain online games that enable the social, creative, imaginative or risky play experiences. Some digital places even have features that serve as loose parts that children can manipulate and have fun with.

Children and young people talked with particular enthusiasm about hybrid play – such as Pokémon Go or Nintendo Ring Fit – for the mix of digital and physical fun. We heard this from adults too:

> "They don't skip but I think TikTok is the new skipping. All we ever see is children walking around doing these movements, and they all know the same movements."

> *Year 6 Teacher 2*

Such child-led hybrid play can be inspired by their media use, transcending the spatial online/off-line dichotomy. At the same time, such hybrid play seems to calm parents' and carers' anxiety about "screen time" and its supposed negative impact on players' physical and mental health.

Calls for change

Children and young people are quick to tell us about a range of online harms and commercial exploitation undermining their digital play experience.

"There are scammers in Adopt Me! … It's when you trade, for example. A scammer could trade their best pet for three really good pets. But actually, they somehow get rid of their pets, take them back to their inventory and just steal the other person's pets."

Girl, 9 years old

"On a lot of … social media there is a lot of creepy people and because of that parents get very controlling of the social media. And that makes the experience for the child less fun."

Teenage girl, 13 years old

Children and young people found freemiums most frustrating and disruptive of their playful experience. They treasured playing in what they regard as a safe environment without commercial pressure. So they call for:

- No freemiums in games (Girl, 12 years old)
- Task-based rewards instead of freemiums for video/online games (Girls, 9 and 12 years old)
- Bann "online trolling" from social media (Teenage girl, 17 years old)
- Content, contact and conduct moderation (Participants, 15-17 years old)

We invite digital providers to make children's and young people's wishes their command!

What do you think? Do you agree, or what would you add? Or call for? Our consultation closes on 12th March 2021. Please do get in touch at info@digitalfuturescommission.org.uk if you can participate! Together let's try to bring about a child-friendly digital world.

This blog is part of the play interview series. You can view the rest of the blog series here.

Dr Kruakae Pothong is a researcher at 5Rights and visiting research fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at London School of Economics and Political Science. Her current research focuses on child-centred design for digital services and children's education data. Her broader research interests span the areas of human-computer interaction, digital ethics, data protection, Internet and other related policies.