Why we need Playful by Design

By Sonia Livingstone

We've seen recent calls for Safety by Design, Privacy by Design, and more. To ensure children's best interests in a digital world, these are all vital. In combination, they promise to address the problems resulting from Risky by Design.

But even if designers and providers of digital products and services took action in all of these ways, it would not be enough. As Herzberg would say, safety, privacy, security and ethics are "hygiene factors" – they are necessary but not sufficient for a beneficial outcome. They address the problems, but do little to facilitate children's agency, motivation, creativity, participation or the host of positives that the digital world could and should afford children.

Building a positive vision of free play in a digital world is particularly important because the very idea of digital play has become controversial, gathering disparaging or downright hostile judgements from policymakers and the public. Indeed, the dominant narrative is so preoccupied with anxieties about screen time, addiction and online risks (often, though not always, with good reason) that it can seem preferable to try and turn the clock back to a pre-digital world. Certainly, it becomes difficult to talk about "what good looks like" or to encourage children to experiment, explore and take risks so as to build resilience online.

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The idea of "by Design" has considerable merit, however. It embeds ethical values into the very process of innovation, trying to retrofit solutions to existing technology when it is, often, too late or too expensive.

"Design is the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes." (Richard Buchanan)

This human *power* can result in products that serve people well or poorly, depending on a host of factors relating to business, regulation, technical knowledge and cultural norms. Crucially, this is a *human* power, so let's exercise it well.

Building on recent work on designing for child rights in underline digital contexts and underline nondigital contexts, and learning from the Digital Futures Commission's recent underline academic research and a underline public consultation, we have proposed underline Playful by Design.

Playful by Design sets out the 12 qualities of children's free play to be optimised in the digital environment. The focus is on children's agency, pleasure, motivation, development and a host of positive benefits. Crucially, we are now figuring out the design features that enable or impede the qualities of play. We'll publish our full report in the autumn.

- You can read about this work in underline our short report just published.
- You can watch Sonia Livingstone's recent underline keynote lecture to the Gamesym 2021 conference.
- If you underline sign up to our mailing list, we'll keep you in touch with our developments.

You can underline download Playful by Design here.

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