

Translating Playing Fields: Digital and the Physical Playgrounds

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INTRODUCTION

Keita Takahashi, the designer of iconic videogames such as *Katamari Damacy* (Namco Bandai 2004), *Noby Noby Boy* (Namco Bandai 2009) and *Wattam* (Funomena 2019), announced in the 2007 GameCity festival at Nottingham, UK, that he was no longer interested in videogames and would design playgrounds instead. Takahashi went on to design a playground in Nottingham but one that was deemed too dangerous by the City Council and cancelled subsequently. 'Digital playgrounds' (Grimes 2021; Farough and Kowert 2022; Nijholt 2017; Giddings 2023) is now a common description for videogames and even the Entertainment Software Rating Board's blog has used the term joining many journalists, authors and academics. Some of the questions that come to mind are how similar is a videogame to a playground, whether it is possible for a videogame to function as a playground and finally, whether the meaning of 'playground' remains the same in these multiple contexts.

Ranging from the kindergarten of Froebel and the gardens for children of Rousseau, the idea of a bucolic outside space for natural exploration or the German outdoor gymnasias, spaces to build one's physical fitness and nationalism, to the adventure playgrounds that were influenced by children playing in World War Two bomb craters (see Kinard 2015) and the sandbox parks, the concept of playgrounds is one that has seen many changes since the nineteenth century when the first playground plans were circulated in 1849. American school principal Henry Barnard's designs featuring 'a large, shaded area with teachers looking on as children played with wooden blocks, toy carts, and two rotary swings' (Hart n.d.) were a notable example of such early plans. Charles Dickens's 1858 speech to the Playground and Recreation Society stressed that 'good play' is essential for physical, social, and mental development' (Henelly 1986). Johan Huizinga's concept of the magic circle, so often quoted in Games Studies, also uses the playground as an exemplar. From the twentieth century onwards, playgrounds have seen much diversity in concept and at the same time, remained rather traditional in execution (unless we extend the definition of

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playground to theme parks). Isamu Noguchi has designed 'play areas imagined unregimented frolicking across large, sloping surfaces with organic rises and dips' (Kinard 2015) but most of his designs have not been accepted ; the Moerenuma Park in Sapporo, Japan, is a notable exception.

On the one hand, the concept of a playground seems to be something that supports 'good' play, whether it is about physical fitness (as some of the installations such as a jungle gym show) or the exploration of nature; on the other hand, there are interactivity and innovation both of which involve a break with the traditional and maybe considered deviations from 'good play'. There is also the added element that is not usually addressed in discourses on playgrounds: this is the fact that play can involve physical danger and play spaces are not always safe spaces. Takahashi's planned playground in Woodthorpe Grange 'included rotating platforms, catapults and sculptable flowers' but was cancelled by the city council possibly because of health and safety concerns. So the question arises as to whether a videogame playground can translate into a physical playground in the real world. Likewise, one also needs to see if a so-called digital playground is necessarily deviating from the earlier norms of 'good play' and how necessary it is for the physical playground to conform to such norms, especially when present-day designers 'envision schools embracing elements of the mutable landscapes of adventure playgrounds, the malleable material of sandbox games, and the explorable elements of the outdoors' (Kinard 2015) keeping in mind videogames such as *Minecraft* (Mojang 2009). Seth Giddings (2023) recent work on the Lightbug Project where he explores how to translate the ludometrics of the park swing into a postdigital experience is also an interesting case study. The theoretical premise here is to examine the mediality of play and the translatability of the play experience from the physical to the digital (especially given the naming of videogames as digital playgrounds) and from the digital to the physical (given the constraints of physical play design vis a vis those of digital games). In addressing these questions, it will be necessary to engage in both a literal and metaphoric comparison of the use of the concept of a 'playground' and also questioning whether play itself can be understood as a single definable entity.

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