

Digital play, iPad Apps and Young Children's Development

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents part of a larger research¹ which aims to understand young children's digital play in relation to their imaginative play - a major force of psychological development in the early years. The poster will be of interest to DiGRA/FDG audience as it focuses their attention on the need for theoretical and research based criteria to appraise developmentally sound apps suitable for preschoolers (3-5 years of age).

Keywords

Young children, imaginative play, iPad, digital play, psychological development

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The proliferation of mobile digital technologies into modern families' homes has brought about significant changes to the leisure activities of young children. Currently, many young children proactively seek regular experiences to play apps for their leisure (Huh 2014). This is not surprising as children's play traditionally occupies a central role in their lives. Contemporary researchers and theorists agree that imaginative play is essential for children's socio-emotional and cognitive development (communication, self-regulation and narrative consciousness) (Vygotsky 1978; Singer & Singer 2006).

However, concern has been raised that children's imaginative play is being gradually replaced by early learning activities often perceived by educators as necessary for children to master the complexity of modern world. This trend is also evident in digital play: the use of educational games is encouraged but recreational apps seem to be underestimated. To address this concern, it is important to remember that children's digital play is significantly different from their traditional imaginative play: while the latter is free and self-regulated, the former is shaped by the design of the apps. This raises the question whether (and how) digital play can provide children with experiences useful for their development, similar to those provided by traditional imaginative play.

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In this poster we use our theoretically and research grounded criteria to examine the characteristics of iPad apps and the opportunities that they provide for preschoolers to engage with imaginative play (Verenikina & Kervin 2011). These criteria include:

- Self-motivated and intrinsically fun: reaching goals is less important
- Provide opportunities for acting in ‘as if’ situations and engage children’s imagination where there is no right or wrong answer
- Discovery-oriented path of play which presents opportunities for making choices, problem solving and visual transformation of images
- Provides the facility to engage collaboratively rather than as single player

For our study we applied our criteria to help us analyse apps from the top-grossing preschooler apps from the iTunes site. We observed ten children playing the selected apps for one hour once a week for eight weeks as part of Digital Play Group situated in a child-friendly research facility. Play was video-recorded. Five play effects emerged from our thematic analysis of the data and the theory of play (presented in Figure 1).

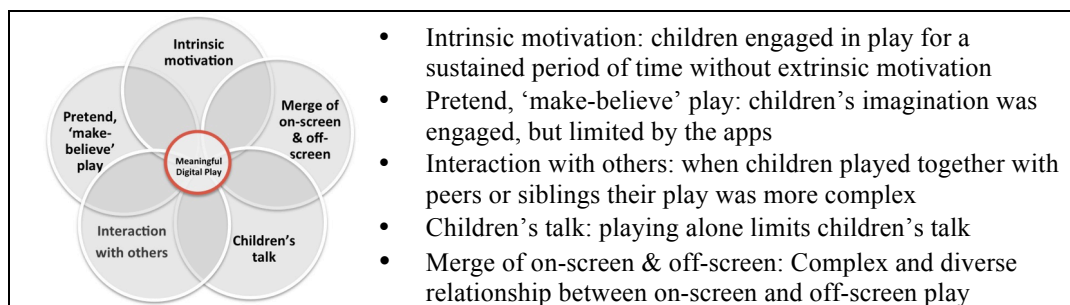


Figure 1: Play effects from analysis of data

The findings demonstrate that the selected apps provided numerous opportunities for children’s imaginative play, however the ways these opportunities were undertaken depended on the context of their use. Meaningful digital play emerges as a result of the intersection of the five play effects; no one effect alone is sufficient to determine the criteria for the design of developmentally sound apps for young children’s leisure.

ENDNOTES

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