Digital and Non-digital Play in School Playgrounds

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Ever since digital technologies entered children’s everyday culture, popular beliefs about its’ devastating effect on children’s traditional play and creativity have become commonplace in the public discourse. However, recent research shows that digital play does not supersede non-digital play and that children successfully integrate computer games as a cultural resource into their playground communication (Burn and Richards 2014, Willet 2013). Nonetheless, most studies tend to consider digital play separately, leaving it out of the overall landscape of children’s play activity.

The goal of my project was to examine digital play as part of the general playing activity in the playground and to analyze how digital and non-digital kinds of play are related to each other within collective face-to-face interaction. Over the 9-month period in 2015-2016, I conducted an ethnographic study at a primary school in Saint-Petersburg, Russia. The data were obtained through a series of observations at an afterschool club for 7 to 9-year-old children where the use of mobile devices was allowed.

My study showed that digital and non-digital play co-exist in children’s playground activity on equal terms, constantly overlapping and interpenetrating. Instead of stimulating individual play, digital games on smartphones and tablets provoked collective play and produced multiple-dimension play communication. Children were able to engage in multiple play interactions almost simultaneously irrespective of whether it referred to the same level of reality (virtual play on several devices) or not (virtual and physical).

Another substantial finding was that the interaction between digital and non-digital play goes in both directions. On the one hand, digital games transfer into the physical playground environment in the form of face-to-face pretend play. Remarkably, verbal communication analysis revealed that basing pretend play on digital play enhanced children’s agentive role: they would act as co-creators and moderators of the whole play universe to a greater extent than in the case of playing digital games or engaging in other varieties of pretend play. On the other hand, pretend play itself enters virtual play worlds when children impose pretend conditions on the virtual reality, and serves to overcome the limitations of the design of these virtual worlds.

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