

Dynamic Playground essay

The main idea we followed for designing a playground was the creation of an environment that prompt some kind of gameplay, but that also allows free playfulness, giving everyone freedom to choose their own game, create one, participate in an existing game or just chill and enjoy the environment. Playgrounds afford a social environment where people can interact with each others and also with different elements that has been designed to be there and provide the framework to a particular play experience. The play experience we wanted to facilitate was in the line of the one we enjoy as spectators of *Ninja Warrior*, placing different kind of obstacles that will be described in depth in this writing. The particularity of our *Dynamic Playground* resides in the use of platforms that change through time, as playgrounds are usually static. By modifying the flow that users can follow, our design provide different player experiences each time, increasing its "replay value", speaking in game terms, or the interest of the players in going back there and playing again.

The intention of this paper is to analyze the results of our design decisions and think about different player experiences we could pursue to develop the design.

Freeplay vs. athletics

The object-based play that emerges in our playground is combined with social play. That was the reason to design different open platforms instead of closed rooms or labyrinthine modules. We want players to be able to see where other people are and try to find them or following them, even though the paths change and following a straight route becomes tricky. As Nicole Lazzaro stated, "People are addictive". *Players communities* produce "CoLiberation" in DeKoven's words: a balance between the player and its connections with the group, that keep players in the flow of the play activity. We can find this in team sports, but also in other enjoyable activities with no goals like dancing in a club that holds a salsa night, for example.

The signifiers we provide are easily identified as obstacles, since obstacle races are becoming more and more popular, and we all have dealt with similar objects (usually in a simpler version) in PE courses at the elementary school or even in common playgrounds where you can climb, run, hang from a bar or other physical exercises. But it doesn't get in conflict with our intention of allowing different kinds of play.

As an example, we can think on how we experience swimming pools in the summer, as a playground with water where we can relax, freshen up, have an ice-cream, socialize, freeplay with how physics affect us under the water and numberless behaviours that nothing have to do with swimming techniques, even

though the place might be used with that intention as well. Usually we can see around lane ropes, board floats or even a lane away from the crowd with some people training and a coach giving instructions, and it doesn't break our relax moment or the magic circle of our splashing jumps competition.

In the same way, users in our playground can choose to interact more or less with the elements we provide. Some of them can enjoy a picnic in the empty platform while others get immerse in a game like tag or a little kid imagine that a bench is a horse and he is riding in the wild west. Meanwhile, others can be training to pass an obstacle as fast as possible.

As our inspiration came from *Ninja Warrior* and the result is a playground attractive for spectators, organizing dynamic obstacle courses might be considered. It would not only be compatible with the freeplay idea, but it could also be an incentive for people. We could place screens in the chill-out platform that follows the race in organized competitions or that display random elements the rest of the time. When the activity ends, the audience can talk about it, meet people with similar interests, play pretending that they are the winner or try to get to a platform they liked, interacting this way with the system that creates the paths.

Different player experiences are welcome and encouraged, and if sports are developed in the playground we can count it as another kind of game where players compete in a social way, encouraged by challenges that they have to solve and pass.

As we use technology to alter the space where the play takes place, we also assessed the idea of providing players devices that identifies each other, allowing social interaction. An example of games that could emerge within this trend are laser tag or hide-and-seek.

Conclusion

After presenting different ideas about more or less organized games that could take place in our playground, I would like to end stressing that they are intended to complement the original idea of providing a context for free playfulness. Users can always move from one platform to another taking an easier way (intended for kids) or going down, out of the platform, to get to another one. That is a valid behaviour as there are no rules or goals. Users can get involved by the path-switcher system at different depths or also ignore it. In our playground, players shape their game through playing and, as designers, we would love to observe what would users do in an open space like the one presented and understanding how different people want to play there.