



Unlock playable places,
bridge different players in the community,
and establish a playground-centred network.

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Project Introduction

Brief: The Future of Play

Challenges:

1. Space for play is threatened by encroaching development and traffic.
2. Freedom to play is stifled by distorted perceptions of risk, and fear.
3. Time for play is eaten up by homework, organised activities & screen-based entertainment.
4. Funding for play workers and playspaces is increasingly scarce.

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So, how might we:

help to ensure the survival of play, playgrounds and play related services as spaces for further social interaction and cohesion in cities? How might we reimagining adventure playgrounds as city services?

Tasks:

Create a future vision of Play, play services and a playful city.

Partners



London Play works to ensure children have the space, time and freedom to play. They want every child in London to have high quality, free play opportunities, near to where they live.



Awesome, a not-for-profit organisation, runs 6 adventure playgrounds in Islington, and opens to all 6- to 13-year-olds living in this borough.



Three Corners is our most direct partner, and this park will become the main pillar of our research and design.

Tutor



John Makepeace

Collaborators



Paul Hocker



Jon Sellers



Andrei Cornea

Team



Feng (Linfeng Zhang)



Charlie (Haoye Chen)

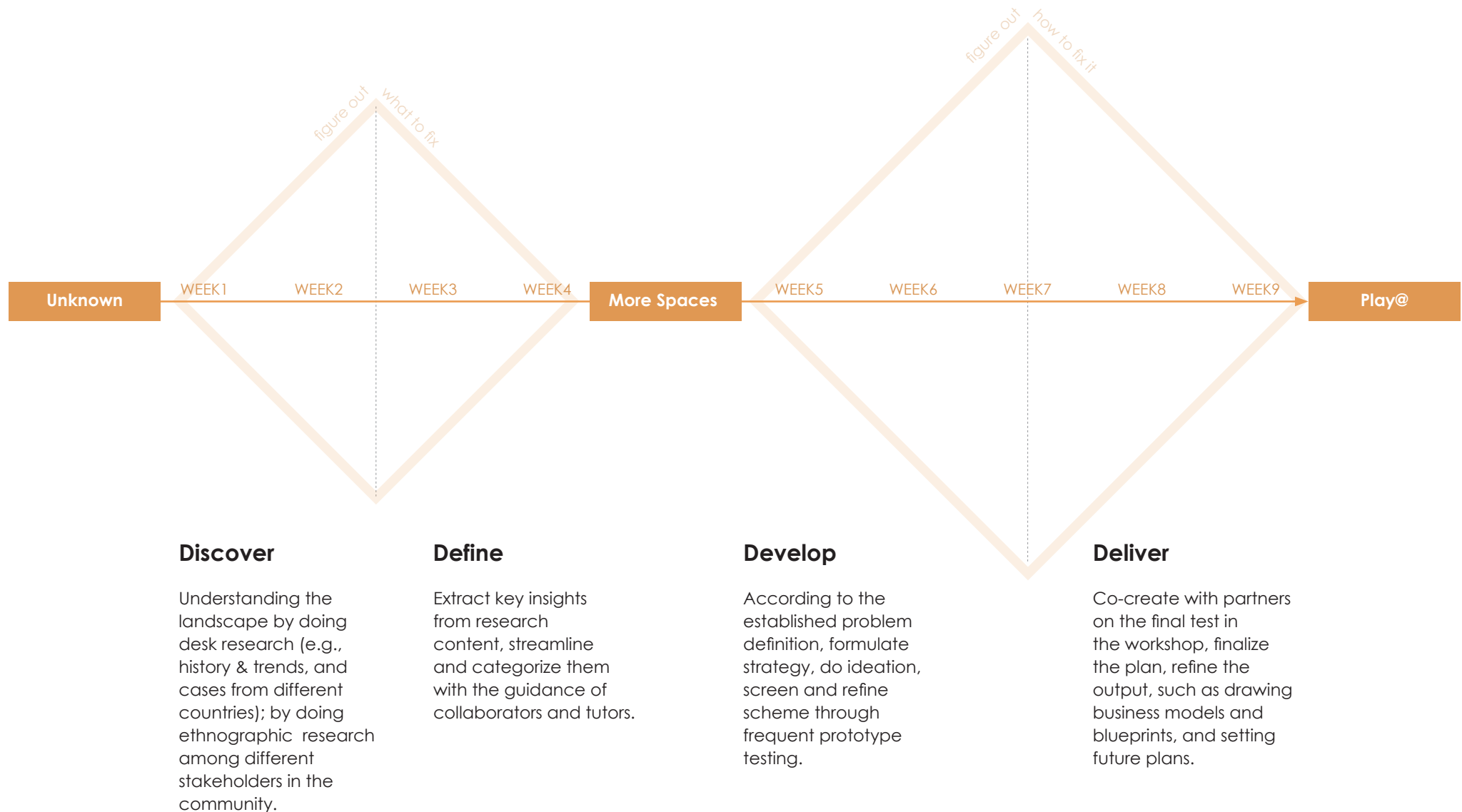


Mila (Xinhui Xu)



Lillia (Siyu Li)

Design Journey



An Initial Landscape

What is play?

"Play is a cultural phenomenon and is fundamental to the human species, "a voluntary activity, executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, bound by freely accepted rules, having its aim in itself, and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and consciousness different from ordinary life."

— Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1950)

"Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child."

— *Best Play, 2000 & National Playing Fields Association (NPFA)*

"Play is nature's training for life."

— David Lloyd George, UK Prime Minister 1916-1922



It seems that play cannot be easily defined, it is vague and vast.

What is the value of play?

"Play is fundamental element of the development of the self. Playing has a general significance as a creative experience in the space-time continuum. It occurs in the transitional space that emerges in the developmental processes through which the child begins to relate, psychologically and somatically, with objects in the external world."

— Donald Winnicott *Playing and Reality* (1971)

"Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength."

— Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MEd (AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS)

Confidence

Belonging

Happy & Safe

Social skills

Play is central to child's learning and development.

Healthy body

Problemsolving

Curiosity

Language

Adventure playground

Adventure playground is "an area fenced off and set aside for children. Within its boundaries children can play freely, in their own way, in their own time. But what is special about it is that here (and increasingly in contemporary urban society, only here) children can build and shape the environment according to their own creative vision". It has more than 70 years history, and was inspired by the 'junk playgrounds' in Denmark, where children could play with loose parts such as sticks, boxes, and ropes – a contrast to the more traditional playgrounds that were being designed. And one of the reasons for its rise and popularity is that:

the built environment is unsafe or unwelcoming for kids to play in.

Three Corners & Islington

Three Corners Adventure Playground

Three Corners, located in Islington, is the most popular adventure park in the area. It is aimed at children aged 6-13 and is open from 3.30-6.30pm on weekdays and 11.30-4pm on Saturdays. There are plenty of great rides like mazes, ziplines, and fire pits, and it has a variety of different activities every day.

It is in a space-constrained and impoverished environment.

Islington Borough of London

Islington is one of London's 33 local authority areas, and according to City Demographics, it is the most densely populated. And according to the Statistics from the Mayor of London, 43% of Islington children are living in poverty, thousands of homes are legally defined as 'overcrowded'...



Desk Research



What is the least we need to know?

With this question in mind, we framed our desk research on history, trends, exotic cases, and various authoritative studies (e.g., mental health, urban planning, inclusion and equality design). What we want to touch on is a general and holistic understanding of playgrounds and play.

Key insights

1. Adventure playground origins from the junkyard, which stimulated a lot of creativity. But now, we provide many designed facilities, so the question is, will the freedom and creativity be limited?
2. Inadequate equality and inclusion, this includes gender, age, health status.
3. Risk should be maintained in the playground & play.
4. Balance: Playing outdoors and online are complementary, and they're both vital.
5. Play should not be limited within the playground, more play areas are needed.

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Does play need to be designed? Can we make the playground more inclusive & diverse? How to maintain the risk? Can we find more places to play?

Ethnographic Research



Children & Playworkers & Games at Three Corners

Observation

We chose to enter the real environment as playground volunteers to start the ethnographic research. Instead of interviews, the first thing we did in the park is to observe what children are playing, how they play, how they interact with others, and what roles play workers and parents play in the playground, etc.

Key insights

1. One of the reasons why children like this place is that they have freedom and a high degree of choice, both activities and facilities are diverse. "They can play anything!"
2. Their favourites are somewhat challenging and new or not often seen outside.
3. Apart from this place, most of them just play at home or somewhere near this park.
4. Children are easily influenced by their own social group. One of the reasons for their rapid switching among various games is the transfer of friends around them.

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Freedom & Uniqueness-Driven | How big is the children's community?

Ethnographic Research



Andrei | Manager, Coordinator, Playworker at Three Corners



Dom & Kerri | Playworkers at Make-Do Play & Mark Field

Interviews with playworkers

After having a basic understanding of children's play, we interviewed Andrei, the manager and a very professional playworker at Three Corners, about how it operates, challenges and expectations, etc. And the key insights are:

- 1.The participation and co-creation of children and even parents is crucial in the design of play.
- 2.The proportion of children of different races and nationalities in the playground is inconsistent with that in the community.
- 3.There is a gap between acceptable age for adventure playground and allowed age for youth club. The oldest child in the playground and the youngest in the youth club, they all experience social incompatibilities.
- 4.There is a lack of healthy interactions between different adventure playgrounds, which is unbeneficial to the industry.

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Then we visited two other playworkers who are active in Islington. Their unique activities and playgrounds do not have large facilities and are aimed at younger children. Our harvest is:

- 1.Many new parents have a lot of anxiety about giving their children the best start, the healthy growth and a safe environment.
- 2.There is a potential inclusivity that it seems like you are not allowed to play after the certain age, so where do those people go?
- 3."We do not have a formal park to deliver our service, but we are open and welcoming, and the barrier is people do not know us, or they can play here."

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Co-creation on play design | Inclusivity on race & age | Bond between playgrounds | Anxiety about risks | Awareness about playful places, etc.

Ethnographic Research



Oly | Sunny's father

Interviews with parents

We had a few conversation with parents from Three Corners as well as Make-Do Play, and we found that:

1. A map of playful places in the community is really needed. Some parents, especially those who are new in the community, they do not know which place is suitable for their kids. Also, they are worried about those unfamiliar space.
2. In the process of children playing, parents' company and observation are very important, not for the children, but for the parents. Some parents admitted that "I have learnt a lot from watching my children playing". They have learned that their children can face crises on their own and solve them in smart ways.

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Map of playful places | "Let parents join, see and learn"

Summary

Potential directions



Play in more space



Parental sensitivity to risks



Shame of play: Age inclusion



Inclusivity: Race & Nationality



Disconnection between A-playground and other places

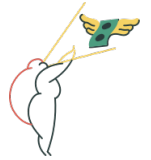
Others need attention during design



Co-creation with children



Challenging elements in play



Open-ended design

Selected direction

Considering factors such as time, feasibility, and importance, we made a choice from the above potential design opportunities:

We wish children to play in more space.

Problem Definition

Recap: previous research

1/33

Densely populated

Islington is one of the most densely populated of London's 33 local authority areas, with around 104 people living on each football pitch-sized area of land.

— *City Demographics*

43%

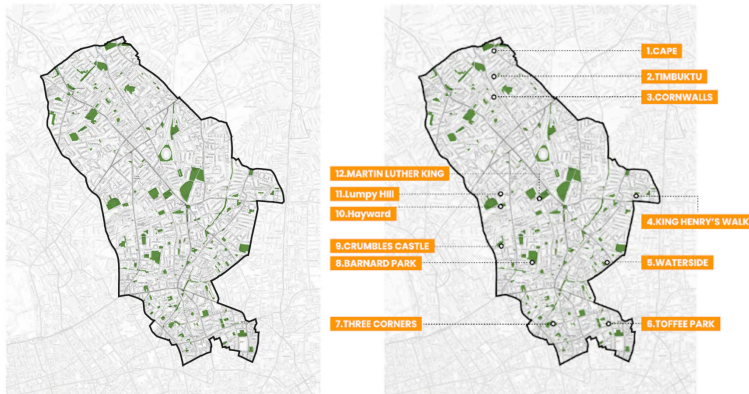
Child Poverty Rate

43% of Islington children are living in poverty, thousands of homes are legally defined as 'overcrowded', many of them do not have gardens.

— *Mayor of London*

It appears that play is limited by the number of playable space.

In-depth research on spaces



Designated open space

12 Adventure playgrounds

Undesignated open space

>400

In fact, Islington already has 12 adventure playgrounds, and apart from many public green spaces, there are more than 400 hundred undesignated open space, such as community playgrounds, and open spaces in residential areas. (*Islington Council*)

The real problems



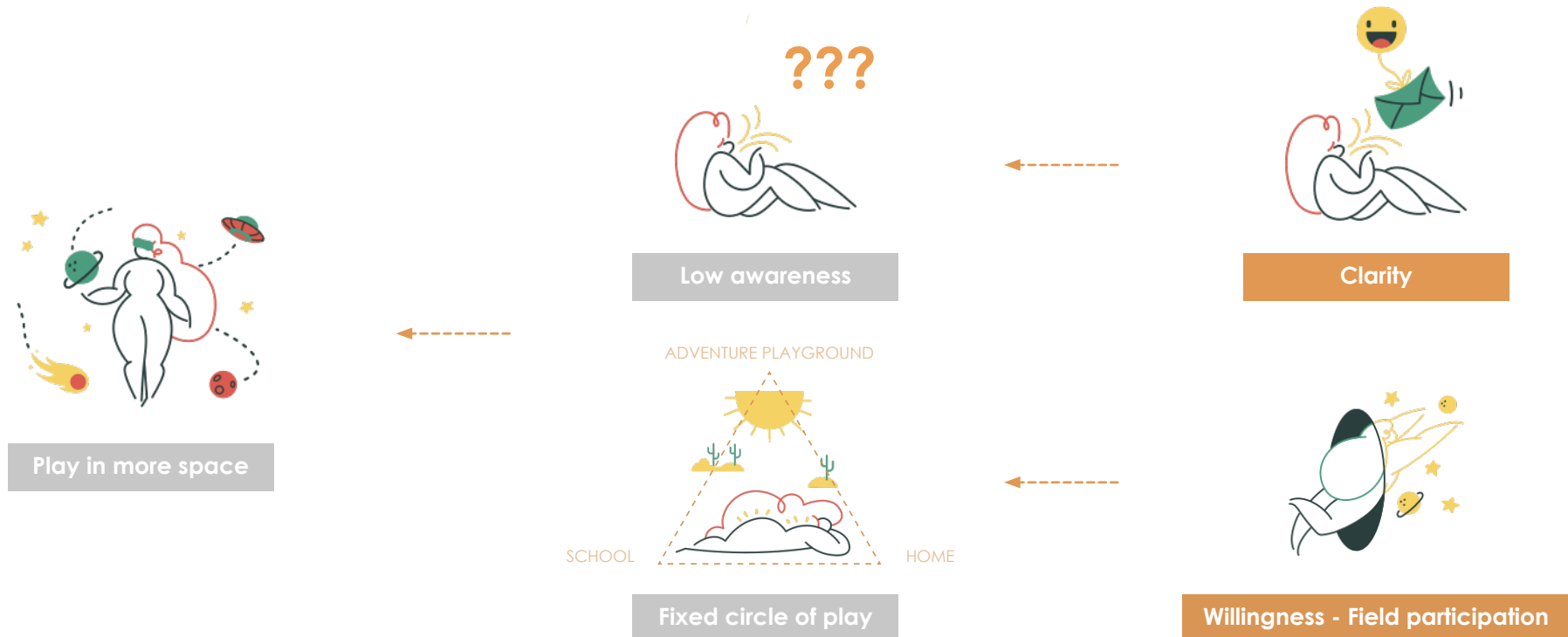
1. Actually, play is limited by the awareness of where is playable.

And...



2. How to enable children to really explore more?

Strategy



Goal

In a densely populated context where many families are crowded, we want to lay design interventions so that Islington's children can play in more and more diverse places. One of the secondary purposes is to improve the utilization of Islington's many open space.

Problems

Islington already has plenty of places to play, it's just that other than the very popular large playgrounds, people don't know much about other kid-friendly space in the community. Especially for younger children, their range of play is limited to three points: home, school, and the playground they often go to.

Strategy

Convey a clarity to children and parents about what places are open, playable, and child-friendly. Nourish a strong willingness in children's minds to step out of their original circle of play and continue to explore more playful space in the community.

Ideation

Clarity

How to provide clarity on playable locations?



Willingness - Field participation

How to stimulate the willingness to explore more and more different play places?

Mapping out all the playable places in the community.

Highlighting the uniqueness of each playable place.



MVP



Making MVP - A map

Some parents asked the playworkers in the Three Corners Playground about where else can be played, and we believed that there might be a information gap between parents and these community resources especially on these child-friendly public spaces, so we downloaded the maps of islington borough and tried to mark those playful places on them as our most viable products(MVP).

Testing in the playground

Then we brought those maps as well as some pictures of those playful places to the playground to see if someone will notice and curious about that, or potentially even be influenced.

Then we found that some of the children had noticed the maps, but they ran away quickly, as well as more parents looked that for a while and some of them even took photo to preserve that.

"the information is useful and now I can take my children to more different playgrounds and see more open spaces nearby in a more fragmented time frame..."



Parents

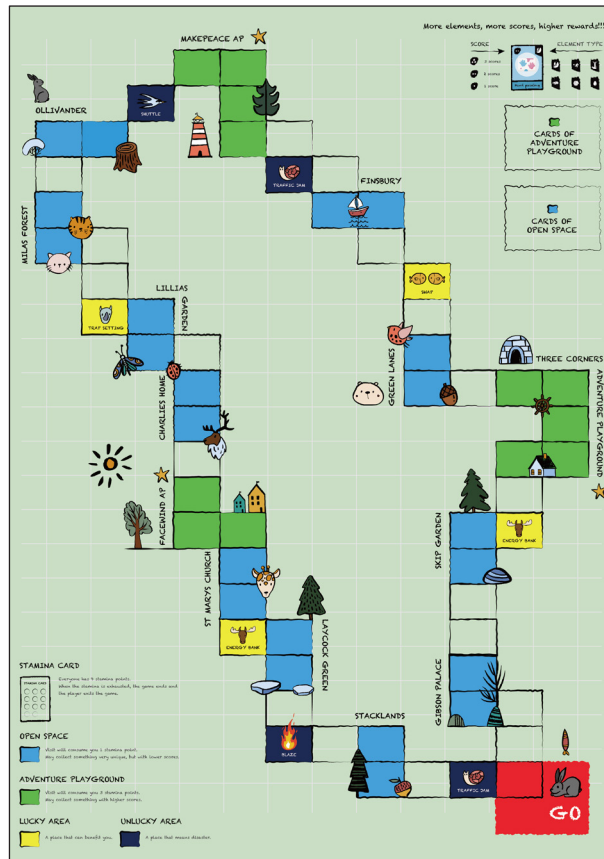
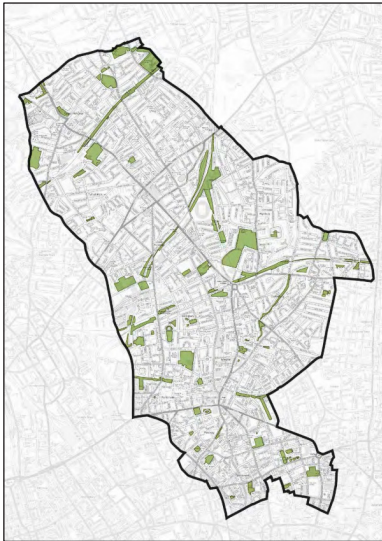
Reflections

We realised that those adult-centred mediums, such as Google Map, did not engage children's interest, even though we've mapped out many playable areas on it. So our next question is:

How to make this map more engaging for children?



Board Game 1.0



Gamification

In order to make the map more attractive, we gamified it, brought cartoon elements, rules, rewards to it. Therefore, in general, we designed a board game. The core rule is that the more places the player explores and the more things they collect, the higher their score and the more likely they are to win. The goal is that the kids can play games and gradually realize that there are so many different places to play in this community, 'why don't I give it a try?'.



Testing in the playground

We brought a prototype to the playground for testing, and the children as well as playworkers showed great interest in playing and exploring it. But the question remains to be, what about then? Does it really have a positive impact? How far is it from reality?

Reflections

Going back to a question we pondered earlier: How big is the community in a children's world?

Even adults rarely recognize the shape of Islington without being reminded, so showing a child such a map doesn't seem to make much sense. If we want to encourage children to explore more in the real environment, then we should consider whether the area covered on the map is within the reach of children. If we want to bring more possibilities to our strategy realization, then what we have to do is:

Making this board game more reality-based.

Board Game 2.0



Three Corner-centred play community

In order to make this game closer to reality, and taking into account future testing and impact measurement, we choose the Three Corners as the starting point and draw a circle according to the distance suitable for children's daily activities. This is the community for children.

Reality-based game content

1. The route on the map corresponds to the road map in reality, which of course also covers the landmark buildings along the way.
2. The shape of the plots on the board game map is also basically consistent with reality.
3. We also show the actual unique facilities/events of each place on the board game cards.

The idea is that if this game map is as realistic as possible, the more likely we are to bring a sense of familiarity and strangeness to the player, and in this sense of novelty, letting the children realize that "There is a lot to play around here, why not give it a try?" would be easier.



Testing through workshops with playworkers: feedback is very positive.

Board Game Overview



Asset 1. Three Corner Based Game Map



Asset 2. Game Cards

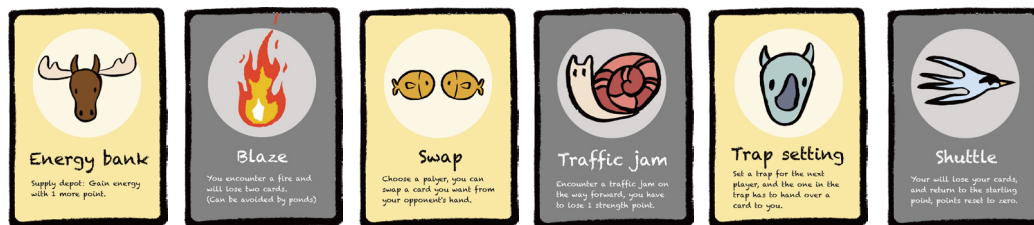
Score



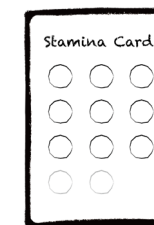
Element



The board game card consists of three parts: representative facilities, scores, and element attributes. The score ranges from 1 to 3 points, and the higher the score, the rarer it is; there are six elements, and the number of elements collected is also important to the result.



Asset 3. Special Event Cards



Asset 4. Stamina Card

And this is the special event card. As players progress through the map, they will encounter unexpected events, which can be good or bad. If a good event occurs, that player will have the opportunity to set traps for other players, or loot other players' cards, etc. If a bad event occurs, the player may have to hand over his card to others or even start from scratch.

This is the stamina card. The player can get a certain amount of points at the beginning, and each place they explore during the game costs a certain amount of 'power'. When the stamina points are exhausted, the game is over. Special event cards may cost or increase the player's stamina points.

Board Game Overview



Basically, the rules are: take turns rolling the dice to move forward, each time players reach a place, they can either explore it or skip it. Choosing to explore can get them special cards unique to that place, and the scores and element types marked on the cards will affect the final score. The game ends when the stamina is exhausted.

A Worldview



Dinosaur theme park - Jurassic world view



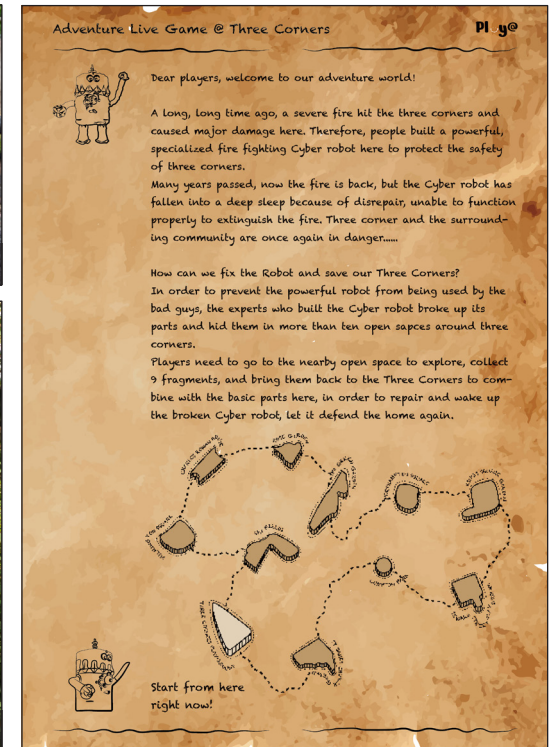
Disneyland - Disney animation world view



Blaze at Three Corners 10 years ago



Robot appeared at TC 10 years ago



Can we do more?

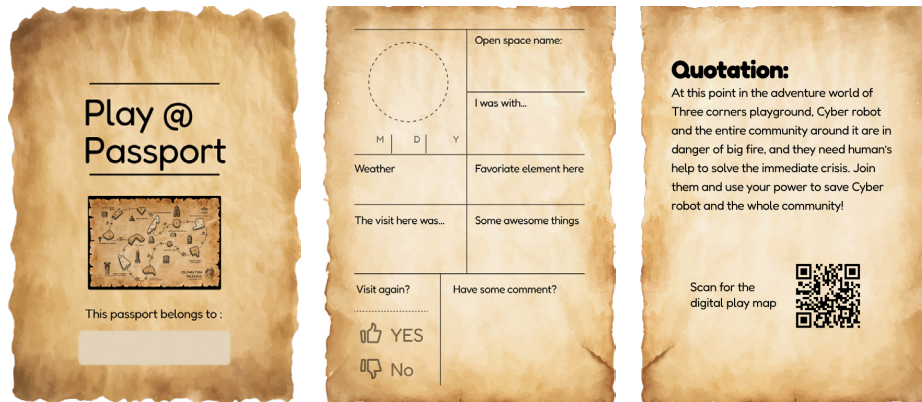
We wished children and parents to be able to really explore those open playable space and discover their own unique points of interest, and we wanted the process to be fun and stimulating for children, so we looked at the design rules of some themed playgrounds and games and found that having a good backstory and world view was an essential part of these games to enhance the sense of immersion and purpose, thus enhancing the play experience.

A world view for Three Corner-centred play community

We therefore combined this idea with a well-known history of the Three Corners adventure playground and designed a more macro story that is set in the community at large, giving children and parents tasks to complete as they explore and thus stimulating their desire for field participation. By doing this, we actually:

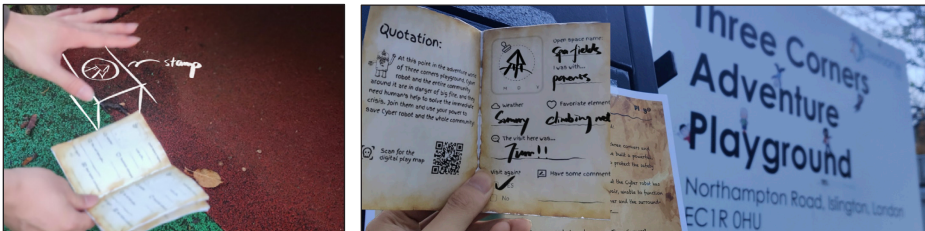
transformed the whole community into a playground.

Live Game



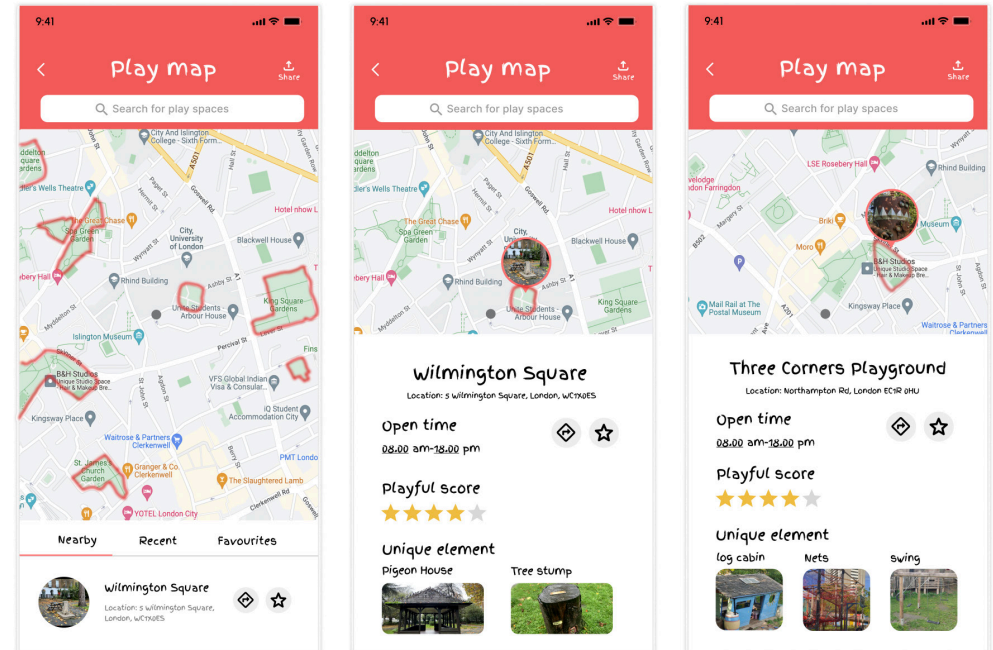
Passport

For the live game, we designed the adventure passport, which is the main prop that players use when exploring in real environment. And it can also be seen as the connection between the board game and the live game. In our plan, the passport is attached with the board game, or players can get it from the playworkers in the starting point of this game, which is Three Corners.



Stamp

The passport is for players to record places they have explored. Each location has its own stamp, and every time players arrive at a new place, they have to find and then get a new stamp on the passport as proof of having explored it.



Digital map

Players can scan the QR code on their passport, and then they will have this digital map, to see those playable places around them. This digital product also shows detailed information about each place, such as opening time, pictures, features and reviews.

Live Game



Posters | Visual guidance

At the door of each open space or playground, we designed posters exclusive to that place to attract children's attention through cartoons and interesting designs, making each place more child-friendly.

The poster shows different features of these place, introduces playability and venue information, and allows players to scan a QR code to find a digital map.

Basic rules

Players can get the game manual from the starting point: Three Corners, which will introduce the world view of this live game in detail.

Players carry their passports, follow the digital map to find places to explore, and search for & collect stamps. This is a collection process. After the players complete the collection, they need to return to the Three Corners to complete the entire story and receive rewards.

We'll show our design more clearly starting on the next page.

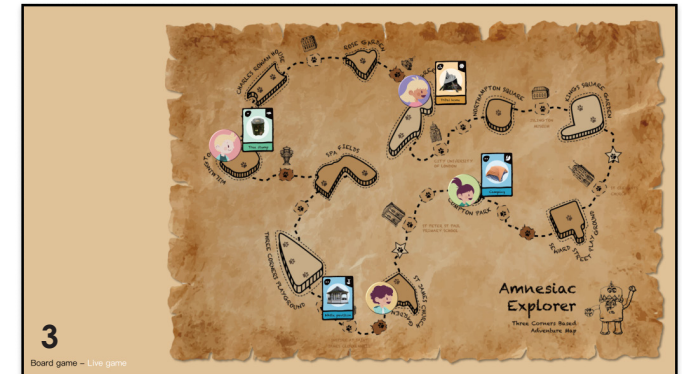
A Whole Story



The board game will be introduced to children by teachers at school, playworkers at playground, or staffs at community centre, etc.



The basic rules are: take turns rolling the dice to move forward.



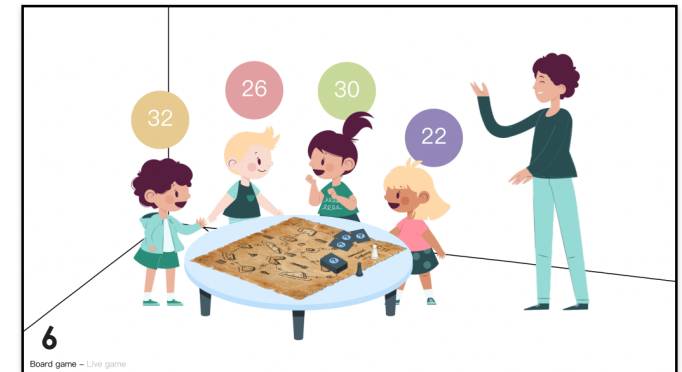
After players get to some places, they can choose to explore them and then get some special cards unique to that place.



The scores and element types marked on the cards will affect the final score.

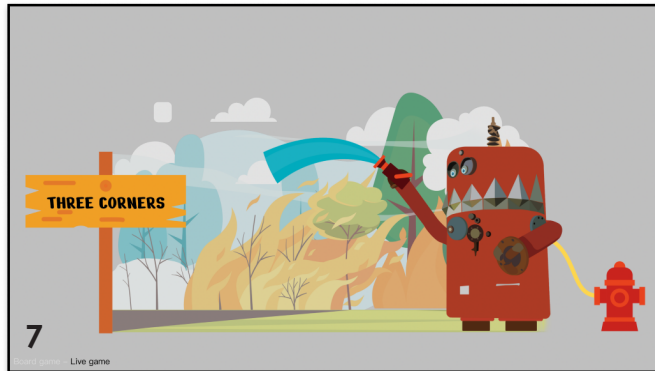


During the game, players will find the school's name on the map, as well as other places close, within the community. The routes on the map, facilities on the cards, are all real.

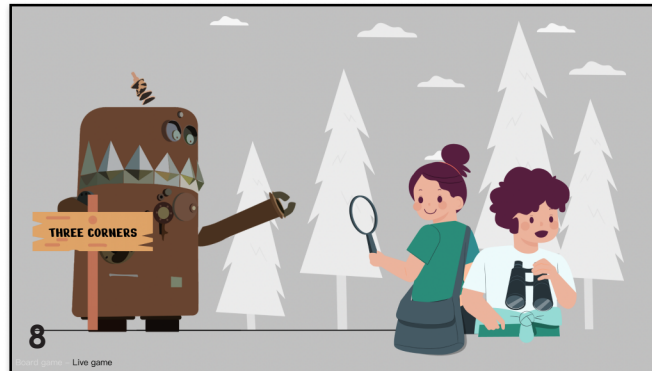


The more and more diverse places the player explores, the more likely they are to win the final score. When the game is over, the winner can get a specific reward. And the live game will be introduced.

A Whole Story



Worldview: "A long, long time ago, a severe fire hit a place called Three Corners and caused serious damage. Therefore, people built a powerful, specialised fire fighting robot to protect this place".



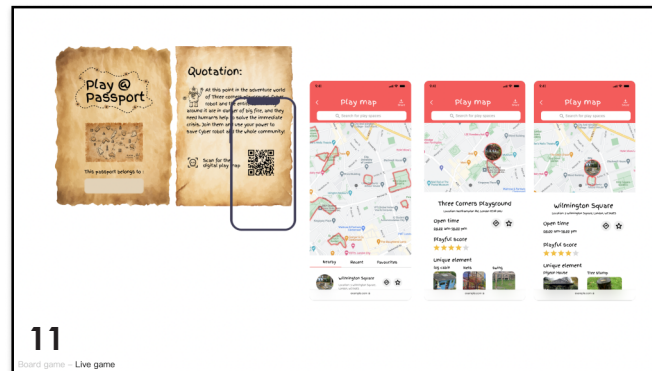
Many years have passed and the robot has been destroyed by mysterious forces, so to avoid another tragedy, people are calling the explorers to come to three corners, repair the robot and protect the world.



Then the players will receive a passport, and be encouraged to visit Three Corners adventure playground to find more.



Players can take the passport back to home and tell their parents about this game.



If they scan the QR code, they will see an interaction map, where they can find the location and pics of Three Corners, and many other playable places.

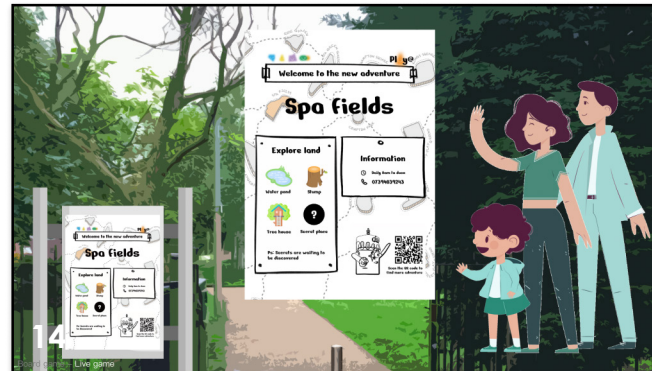


When players and even their parents arrive at Three Corners, they will see the real robot, and then be convinced by the worldview. After that, playworkers will show them more details about the live game.

A Whole Story



The mission is to explore places in the community to collect fragments, like a treasure hunter, and then after finishing this mission, players can come back to the Three Corners and get rewards.



Every explorable location in this game has a unified visual guide, from which players and parents can discover the uniqueness of this place.



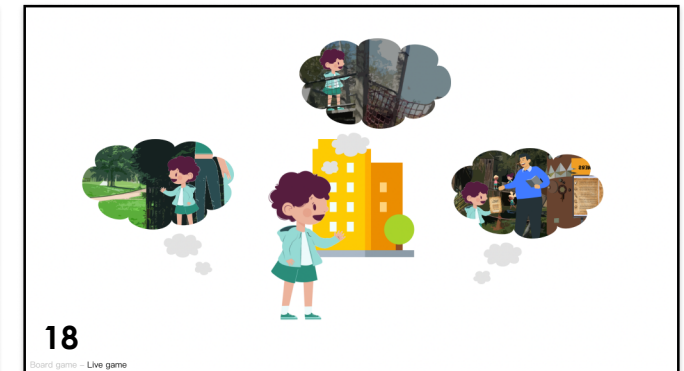
There are a few hidden fragment boxes in each place that always needed to spend time finding. Players can find the stamper in the box and stamp on the passport.



There's no set order of exploration in this game, and the distances between locations are within a comfortable walking distance, so it's freeing without being too challenging.



After exploring all the places and collecting all stamps, players can go back to Three Corners, hand over the passport, and receive the reward, which will be a personalised robot.



The collection journey is actually a process of exploring different playful places, playing various facilities, engaging with different children, and experiencing the diversity of the community.

Game Builder

Board game

A gamified map showing real names of playful places, locations, routes, facilities, activities, etc.

Live game

Through an event that happened in a real place and a game worldview that is strongly connected to reality, stimulates children's desire to explore.

So, these are our interventions, including a board game and a live game, to deliver awareness and emerge real engagement. But is that all? This board game, as well as the Three Corners-centred live game, are just our test products on a small scale, actually, what we really want to deliver is a game builder that can be used by play organisations such as London Play, to improve the playability of different communities.
Introduce:



**A game-driven service for organizations
to unlock playable places,
bridge different players in the community,
and establish a playground-centred network.**

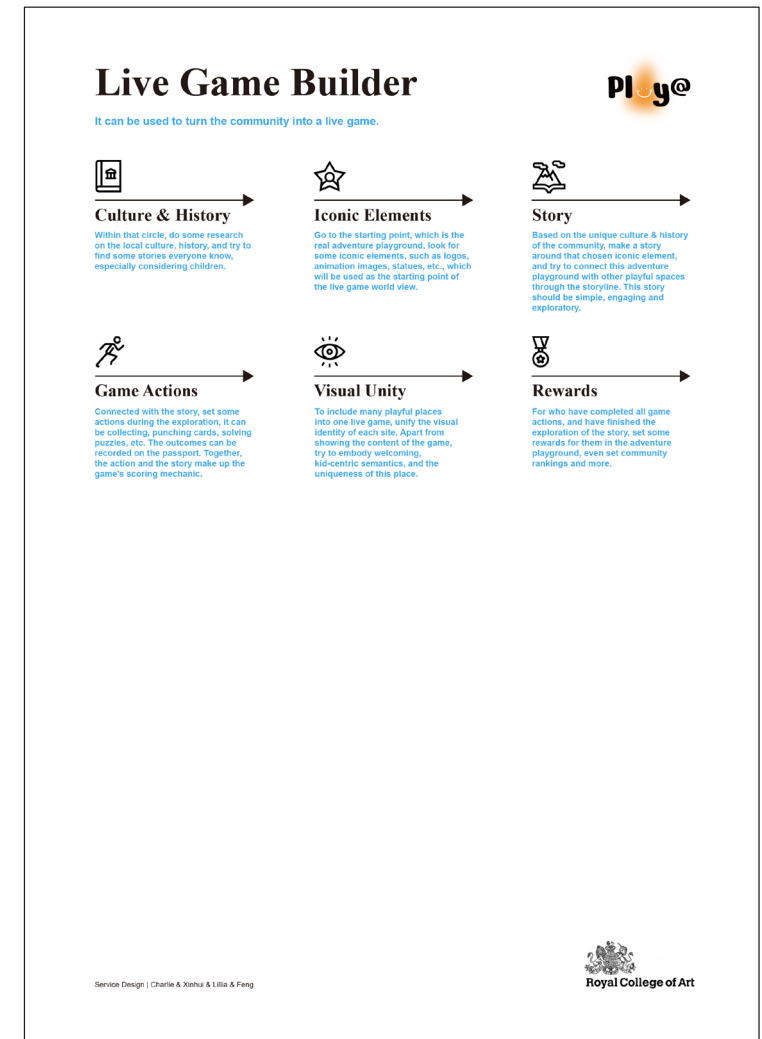
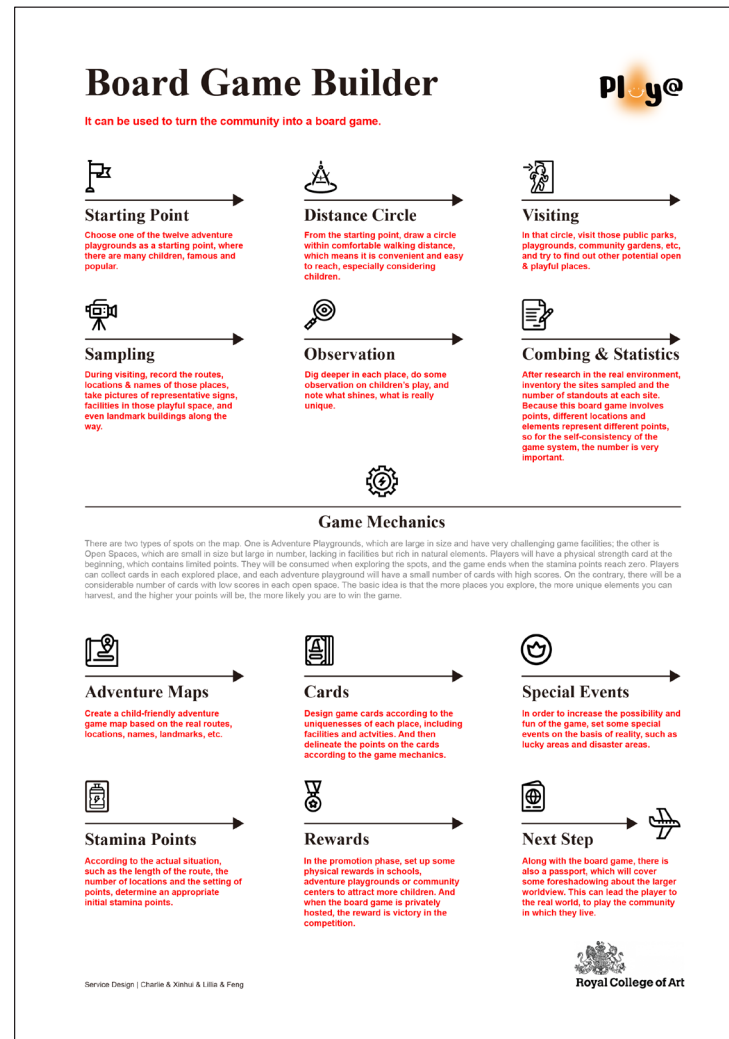
Game Builder

Details

It has two parts. A board game builder and a live game builder. The previous one can help turn the community into a board game, and the later one can help create a reality based worldview and turn the community into a live game.

If we start from the board game builder, let us take London play as an example, to create a map or a journey, the very first thing they have to do is to choose a starting point, maybe an adventure playground, or somewhere else representative...then, starting from that point, London play should draw a circle within comfortable walking distance, cause it should not be a large community, like we have showed on the map, just a small scope. Then, do the field research, sampling, observation, and record the uniquenesses of different places. And then start the real game design, including the visuals, and the mechanics.

Next, for the live game, within that circle draw in the board game building, do some research on the local culture & history, find and choose iconic elements, establish an attractive and engaging game story based on those realities, and finally, design the game.



Value



Children & Parents

Concise play information will be passed on to them, which can enable children to have more freedom, options and access;
And the real, deep engagement in diverse places can contribute to their learning and development.

Freedom & Development



Other play organizations

By practising Play@, play organisations can reach more and further places, connect more and more diverse local organisations, expand their influence, which can be beneficial to attracting funding, and achieving their vision.

Influence & Vision-achieving



Adventure playgrounds

A huge play network centred on the adventure playground will be formed;
Play facilities and activities will be improved with more frequent interaction between playworkers from various play places.

Connection & Improvement

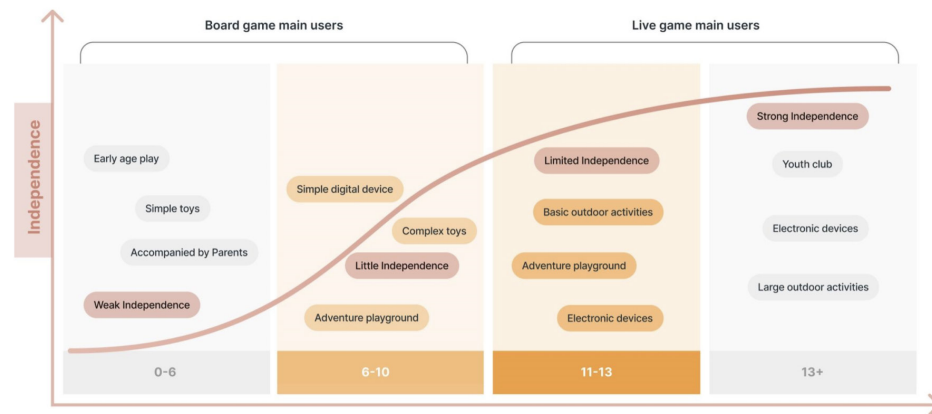


Community

With more visit, the utilisation rate of public open space will be improved;
Those engaging games and strong play atmosphere will attract more and more visitors, even outsiders;
And the happiness of the whole community will also increase.

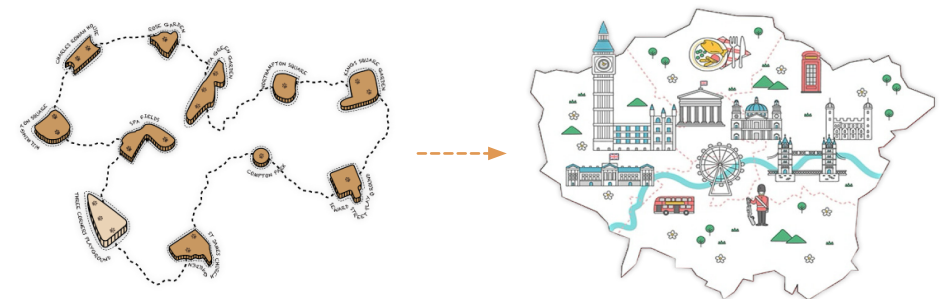
Culture & Visibility & Economy

What is next?



Age group

Currently, due to different game scenarios of the two games, the board game we designed is more suitable for younger children, and live game for outdoor exploration is more suitable for the older age group. In future development, we hope to do better on age adaptation.



A small scale pilot project

A gamification design system

Prototype

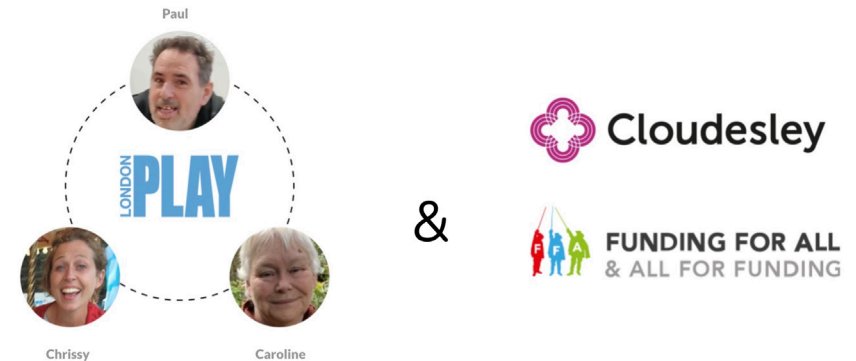
Take our current board game as well as the live game as a small scale pilot project. With the help of Three Corners & London Play, we want to deliver them to the real environment and test the long-term impact. After that, we hope to build a gamification design system and take it to more communities.

What is next?



Game builder optimization

Based on the prototype of the games, we want to develop our game builder within those play organisations, and optimise it in practice.



Funding

We had a few meetings with Paul, Chrissy and Caroline from London Play. We talked a lot about the implementation of this project, and the funding. So we reached an agreement that we both want to continue this Game & Toolkit, potentially, in the coming future, we are going to sit together to talk about applying for the Cloudesley's Small Grants Fund.

Reflections

Play

Surprisingly, everyone's definition of play is different, it's quite subjective, and some even vary wildly. If we insist on summarizing, it is more linked to pleasure, such as "things that make me happy", but everyone's way of making themselves happy is very different.

Our original intention is to establish a holistic language system that can clearly describe play, so as to better understand, utilize, and even design play.

Children

Kids are the best players and game designers in the world. In our observations, they seem to be able to find or develop playability on any item. They can quickly create a game rule, and quickly abandon it and invest in a new one.

At the same time, it is interesting that parents can sometimes be equivalent to bondage for children. The children who frantically play in the adventure playground are like gas, and when the parents arrive, the children seem to return to a steady state and become solid.

From this we start to associate, learning from childhood to adulthood is both an improvement and a constraint. We have learned authoritative theories and rules, but at the same time gradually lost the idea of unfettered and unconstrained.

Service Design

In the whole design process, our biggest challenge is actually communication issues, for example, how to effectively communicate with children and define their needs. Starting from this, we believe that service designers often need to play the role of communicators. Aside from those exquisite interfaces, the first thing we need to design is actually discourse—a specific language for communicating with different stakeholders.

The real insights are in the hands of practitioners who have been embedded in the community for a decade or two. We have met many excellent play workers in the community, many of whom are unknown, but we are deeply inspired by their experiences, ideas, and attitudes towards children and play. And all we did was steal the light, capture snapshots of their thinking during hours of interviews combined, and finally get back to our comfort zone and design some beautiful products.

We're not bashing this phenomenon because it's there for a reason and everyone is limited. But we think, as a service designer, to have a real social impact, we need to embed ourselves in the community for a long time to experience.



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