

# PLAYABLE FUTURES

## NEXT GEN THINKING FOR THE FUTURE OF PLAY

Playable Futures is a collection of insights, interviews and articles from global games leaders sharing their visions of where the industry and medium will go next. Initially published on GamesIndustry.biz.



## The LEGO Group's vision for building better digital playgrounds

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Anna Rafferty has spent some 20 years innovating with major brands in the digital space, and currently stands as Vice President; Consumer Engagement at the LEGO Group, Chair of The Women's Prize Trust, and Commissioner for Digital Futures Commission, among other roles. Rafferty also holds additional special responsibilities in the company for Digital Child Safety, Rights and Wellbeing, and the LEGO brand tone-of-voice.

The LEGO Group's Anna Rafferty has been pondering the merits of 'rubber safety mulch'.

The soft, slightly bouncy surface found coating the floor of outdoor playgrounds the world over is critically important to safety. But it also provides a surprisingly helpful analogy through which to think about how the design and delivery of digital spaces such as video games must change in the future.

"I love that rubber surface," says the LEGO Group's vice president of Digital Consumer Engagement, with sincere enthusiasm. "It's not about the surface itself, but what it enables. It lets my children climb, swing and explore, and maybe even leap off something and graze their knee... but I know they're not going to come to serious harm. If they get in trouble around turn-taking on the slide, they'll have to solve that problem with the other kids there

"Because playgrounds aren't all technicolour rainbows – there's conflict and problem solving and challenge, and all those things are important to development. That's what learning through play is about. I want my kids to be able to explore those things, and to be able to go to the playground, but in a way that, if they fall over, they're not going to seriously hurt themselves, and I think that's how we should all be thinking about building digital spaces in the future. In fact, thinking that way will inevitably become a fundamental part of building all digital spaces. That's the future we're currently looking at."

This isn't about the metaverse exclusively, or even predominantly. It's certainly not just about games. And yet the increasing intersection of distinct digital spaces and

the inevitable rise of experiences that blend the real and virtual mean a shift in the paradigms that frame the existing digital world is coming. Children will soon have presence in a far wider sweep of digital destinations, potentially stepping in from parallel experiences or even reality.

### Participation Matters

Rafferty and her team within the LEGO Group are devoted to understanding and enabling the potential of play and play-based learning in digital spaces. They recognise how play can let youngsters – and adults – explore social skills, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, confidence, a sense of belonging or purpose, and so much more. Engendering that potential in appropriate ways is clearly deeply motivating to them.

As part of that effort, Rafferty and her colleagues are now partnered with UNICEF on the Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) project; an ongoing effort that explores how to create practical tools for creators, businesses, policymakers, governments and other organisations so they feel empowered to put the well-being of children at the centre of digital design. It's the kind of concept that may very likely become a mainstay of video games' creation.

What's fascinating about RITEC – and the wider effort at the LEGO Group – is that a guiding principle focuses on children's rights to participate and have their voices heard. Traditional approaches to keeping digital spaces safe for younger audiences have understandably been defensive, and focused on curtailing children's access though the likes of age ratings. That can

be absolutely necessary. But there's also another way emerging that recognises and celebrates the many positives of digital participation, as well as the fact that children continue to access many digital experiences regardless of well-intended systems such as age restrictions.

"If we believe that play is good and beneficial, and if digital play is an increasing part of a child's 'play diet' that also involves outdoor play and other forms of physical play, and if we all recognise that the existing digital world didn't have child's rights and wellbeing designed into it from the forefront, then we need to ask what that all means. We at the LEGO Group and other organisations need to invest in understanding this. Safety will always be the first priority – but keeping kids safe is just the start of our effort, and not the end. By taking a proactive approach to children's digital play we can find the right solutions that allow children to engage in a digital world that has wellbeing designed into it and elevate children's voices throughout the process."

"I want to help establish an expansive, constructive position that can help any innovator – whether they are a big company like the LEGO Group or perhaps a small startup or any kind of game developer – to be able to think about different ways to involve and support children when it is inevitable they will be in an experience."

And, says Rafferty, we're motivated by the real impact we believe this will have; this isn't just an academic exercise. These tools and resources will be essential to the inevitable future of digital, making them part of the inevitable future of games.

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### A Framework For Digital Playgrounds

That's where the rubber safety mulch analogy comes in. To Rafferty, it presents an example of a tool that provides children access to all the learning that can be unearthed in a playground. Contrastingly, a traditional defensive approach might see playgrounds absent from all parks. That might ensure absolute safety for children, but it also entirely excludes them from participating in the experiences and opportunities for learning through play that playgrounds excel in delivering.

"The framework of the playground is set up in a way that gives me as a parent trust to be able to let my kids explore and learn and do things themselves," Rafferty continues. "And that's almost what we would love RITEC to achieve; to try and create and establish positive, constructive frameworks for digital playgrounds that enable the kids to be empowered, and to explore things themselves. And this isn't just about doing a nice thing.

It's a really important part of the future of digital play."

That importance is exactly what motivated the partnership between Epic Games and The LEGO Group, which – while distinct from RITEC – considers how a true metaverse could not just protect but also empower youngsters. Those kinds of efforts very well may become much more familiar going forward.

Rafferty is quick to point out this is about more than RITEC or LEGO-related initiatives specifically. A movement is underway focused on something essential to the future of games, online social spaces, metaverse-like experiences, and any digital realms where play is present. The frameworks, tools and studies the RITEC initiative are exploring are not presented as conclusive or final but hope to inform a wider conversation about how to create and sustain safe digital play spaces with a capacity for positive impact.

At its most straightforward, Rafferty asserts, it is simply about caring for the future of society and children.

"I think that increasingly parents, shoppers, and legislators are absolutely going to be thinking about this, as they see how digital is changing," she concludes. "And this is only going to grow. So inevitably those creating digital worlds will also need to adapt. And I truly believe that relying on retrofitting your company or product to the new standards will be painful and expensive. So it's best to get on board today and build things the right way for tomorrow."