Choosing to explore: agency, consequence and return in leisure games

Research on agency, playtime and child digital play informs questions about exploration, understandable consequences and voluntary return. Different populations and settings limit transfer; no retained source evaluates Snacks Orchard or establishes benefits for it.

Research by Education Angel Group.
Education Angel Group is developing Snacks Orchard and has an interest in the proposed product. This review does not establish its effectiveness.

Current edition reviewed: 2026-10-12. Revision: public-v2.

Earlier editions

- Snacks Orchard: a small authored world worth choosing

  Research edition reviewed: 2026-09-19. Revision: public-v1.

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A leisure game asks for time that a player could spend elsewhere. Exploration, characters and surprise can give that time a purpose, but an attractive world does not establish that playing it is enjoyable. The central questions are what a player can choose, how the world makes that choice intelligible, and whether continuing or stopping remains genuinely optional.

This report examines those questions across game-experience research, child digital-play accounts, accessibility guidance and existing alternatives. It separates enjoyment from learning or health outcomes, and a recognizable consequence from a claim that the game changes someone outside play. EAG is developing Snacks Orchard and has an interest in its success; the later connection to that project is a design rationale, not an independent evaluation. No original interviews, play sessions or participant data were collected.

1. Exploring with a reason to act

Exploration is more than movement through scenery. A player may be looking for a destination, testing what an object does, following a character or deciding whether a detour is interesting. Those purposes can coexist. The practical question is whether the available actions and responses make the trip understandable without removing the pleasure of discovery.

Choice also has more than one meaning. Selecting an appearance expresses a preference; choosing a route changes where the player goes; acting on an object may change what can happen later. None is inherently the most valuable. A long list of options can still leave a player unsure what matters, while a limited set can support intentional play. The useful distinction is between a choice a player understands and a nominal choice whose consequences remain obscure. This is a design judgment, not a measured rule that fewer options always work better.

Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski's four 2006 studies provide relevant motivation evidence. Perceived autonomy and competence were associated with enjoyment and preferences for future play; the studies also examined intuitive controls. Studies 1-3 used university students, short Nintendo 64 sessions and questionnaires. Study 4 surveyed 730 online-community members aged 16-44. These populations and tasks do not establish how children will experience a contemporary adventure game. Collection calendar dates were not verified. Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski, S1

The same paper resists a simple benefit story. Mean vitality declined in Study 1, with no mean improvement in mood or self-esteem. In Study 3, vitality declined for three games and self-esteem declined for all four. Associations between need satisfaction and enjoyment therefore should not be rewritten as a uniform improvement in wellbeing. Intended future play is also not observed long-term return. Relatedness in the multiplayer work concerned other players, not a validated relationship with a fictional companion. Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski, S1

For leisure-game design, this supports asking about intentional action, understandable control and the experience of being able to act. It does not prescribe a story, camera, character or difficulty level. A comprehensible game can be dull, and a demanding game can be enjoyable. Surprise and challenge need to be interpreted alongside what the player wanted to do, rather than treated as failures merely because they took effort.

2. Consequences that belong to the world

An authored consequence gives an action a place in the game's fiction. A response can acknowledge what just happened; a later encounter can reveal that something changed. The first concerns immediate feedback, the second continuity. A flourish that is pleasant to watch need not carry later meaning, and a saved state need not be meaningful simply because software retains it.

Recognizable consequences require some consistency. If similar actions produce incompatible responses without an understandable reason, the player may be unable to tell whether a discovery was intentional, accidental or a fault. Consistency need not mean predictability in every detail. Humor, mystery and surprise can still be coherent within the world's rules. These distinctions describe a possible standard of craft; the retained studies do not establish a universal formula for memorable worldbuilding.

Characters can help make places and reactions distinctive, but liking a character does not demonstrate a beneficial companion relationship. A player might enjoy watching an expressive response yet prefer not to control it. Another might care more about exploring routes than meeting the cast. Treating either preference as evidence of a deficiency would miss what leisure choice is for.

The consequence also needs to survive the route by which it is understood. A change conveyed only through a brief animation may be difficult to recognize when motion is reduced, sound is unavailable, or visual attention is elsewhere. Readable descriptions or alternative controls can carry the same meaning without reproducing every visual detail. Whether they actually do so requires use of the game, not a claim based on their presence in a specification.

3. Stopping, remembering and choosing to return

A satisfying ending to a session need not be the ending of an adventure. Players may leave because they have discovered enough for now, reached a natural pause, lost interest, become tired or need the device for something else. The game cannot infer all of those reasons from session length. Nor should leaving count as failure by definition.

Return has a similar ambiguity. Curiosity about a changed place differs from anxiety about losing progress or leaving a character in distress. Repeating an action may express enjoyment, or uncertainty about whether it worked. These are possible interpretations, not findings about any particular player's behavior. A return count alone does not settle them.

Vuorre and colleagues' 2022 study is an important counterweight to treating more play as more wellbeing. It examined 38,935 active adult players across seven games, three wellbeing survey waves and six weeks of logged play, including the pre-survey interval. Recruitment occurred from May to September 2021. Participants self-reported being at least 18, with a median age of 34. The original article found little evidence of meaningful average effects of time played on wellbeing. Vuorre et al., S2

Logged play is a useful improvement over relying entirely on recalled hours, but the panel was observational. Confounding, selection of games and active players, low initial response and missing-data sensitivity limit causal interpretation and generalization. The result neither estimates a child-game effect nor proves that all games and patterns of use are harmless. Oxford's institutional announcement describes the same research, not a separate replication. Vuorre et al., S2; Oxford Internet Institute, S2a

Continuity creates a more direct obligation. When a game says it remembers a choice, its resumed state should match that promise or clearly explain recovery failure. Remembering only what was promised can be sufficient; preserving more private information is not automatically better. A player should understand the distinction between continuing, restarting and losing a save. None of those functions needs to imply a daily obligation, a monetary economy or a school record.

The conclusion is narrower than an anti-playtime rule. A long session may be chosen and enjoyable; a short one may be frustrating. Time matters as context and burden, but the quality of the experience and the reason for continuation need separate attention.

4. Children, settings and accessible participation

Evidence about children is particularly sensitive to who played, which games were used and the circumstances of participation. A freely chosen home activity differs from an organized afterschool program. Adult help, language, reading ability, device access and the availability of another activity can all alter what participation involves. These are relevant context questions, not measured inequalities inferred from a game's theme.

UNICEF's Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) project describes three different research components. The afterschool work involved 255 children aged 8-12 in the United States, Chile and South Africa over six to twelve weeks. The home work involved 50 children aged 6-12, with 240 visits across four countries over 14 months. Physiological work involved 69 Australian children aged 7-13. These are distinct populations and conditions, not one uniform sample or a single effect applying to ages 6-13. The project was co-founded with the LEGO Group and funded by the LEGO Foundation. UNICEF Innocenti, S3

The investigators' April 30, 2024 account describes selected tablet games, usual-afterschool comparison activities and a ten-week program for children aged 8-12 in the United States, Chile and South Africa. It reports an overall wellbeing improvement in the South African digital-play group, with more conditional findings in the United States and Chile. Social interaction accompanied the program. This is an investigators' summary of overlapping RITEC research, not a second independent trial. Homer, Plass and Froehlich, S4

The full phase-two report was unavailable for appraisal. Random allocation, effect estimates, uncertainty and subgroup specifications could not be verified from the retained accounts. Collection calendar periods were not established, and an April 2024 publication date is not a data-collection date. Ten weeks falls within six to twelve weeks; the descriptions alone do not demonstrate a conflict. The accounts cannot isolate authored characters, discovery or remembered consequences as the cause of a benefit. They offer context for differing experiences, not a pooled wellbeing claim for leisure games.

Accessibility guidance answers another kind of question. Microsoft's Xbox Accessibility Guideline 116 recommends giving players adequate time to perceive and act on interface information, including adjustable or user-advanced information where appropriate. It distinguishes non-core interface timing from timing

essential to gameplay. It does not require every game to have the same rhythm or certify a game's accessibility. Microsoft, S7

A disappearing instruction, an action that depends only on sound, or a route that requires precise camera movement may affect who can participate. An alternative route is meaningful when it retains useful decisions and understandable consequences, not merely when it describes what an inaccessible scene would have shown. Likewise, adult assistance should be distinguished from independent use. Neither the guidance nor the RITEC summaries establish that a particular game's input, reading demands or recovery behavior works for its intended audience.

5. Existing adventures and other uses of leisure time

There is no need to invent a shortage of games to justify an authored adventure. Existing titles already offer clear reasons to explore. A Short Hike's developer describes a mountain destination, optional routes, discoveries and encounters with fellow hikers. Alba: A Wildlife Adventure's developer describes a character-led island visit, wildlife exploration and activity at the player's pace. These are substantial leisure propositions, not controls against which a new game wins because its theme is different. A Short Hike, S5; Alba, S6

The descriptions allow a limited comparison: where does exploration lead, how do characters belong to the place, and how does the player choose what to do next? They do not provide comparative satisfaction ratings, child suitability or accessibility results. Neither title was play-tested for this report. Current prices, purchases and device compatibility were not verified, so the comparison is neither a purchase recommendation nor a claim about present availability on a particular device.

Non-digital choices widen the question. Drawing a character, making up a story with an adult, outdoor play and quiet time are plausible alternatives when those activities are available. This report assigns them no comparative health, learning or enjoyment benefit. They matter because choosing a screen is not the only acceptable outcome of leisure choice. Someone who prefers the characters as a story rather than an interactive world may be expressing a useful preference, not failing to appreciate the game.

The artistic question remains open after the comparison. A world can borrow the general idea of a legible destination without borrowing another game's map, cast or distinctive expression. Recognizable geography, purposeful encounters and player pace are questions of construction, not proof of originality or superiority. No population demand estimate or market-size claim follows from these alternatives.

6. Relevance to Snacks Orchard's full authored world

Snacks Orchard is a planned standalone, story-led, fruit-powered adventure within EAG. Its tagline is “Explore a fruit-powered world full of characters, surprises, and adventure.” The intended world includes expressive characters, connected exploration, player-led action and changes that remain recognizable on return. Its larger game-world and entertainment-property ambitions are not reduced to one companion encounter. The wider creative direction includes characters, worlds, music, animation, merchandise, spin-offs and connected

experiences. Its named RealitySync™ / WorldSync™ environmental layer is intended to reflect location, weather and time inside the game. These are creative and product intentions, not evidence of available experiences, verified operation or permission to collect location data. EAG product definition, A0

The independent research suggests useful questions about that intention: whether exploration has a purpose the player can recognize, whether a deliberate action changes a later encounter, and whether repetition and return remain interesting without pressure. A one-clearing journey can examine an initial loop, but it cannot establish the coherence, variety or appeal of the whole adventure. A companion, object and rest journey can be one encounter within that adventure, rather than its defining ritual. Exact regions, actions and controls belong to the game's approved design, not to conclusions supplied by this literature. The established cast, fruit anatomy and independent world identity remain intact.

Orchard owns its story, environment, interaction and progress. Snacks After Class may orient and link to it without making it an After Class room or activity launcher. Runstr supplies identity only when an account is required; anonymous play need not create one. Identity does not transfer saves, permissions, points, rewards or school resources by assumption. An equivalent play route must preserve meaningful choices, consequences and remembered state. The world must not depend on guilt, artificial waiting, decaying needs or an obligation to return. These are product boundaries, not observed capabilities.

The remaining questions concern the actual audience and game: intended ages and reading/support needs, approved control and world-state details, repeated exploration, reasons for return or decline, device burden and accessible participation. A first usable loop and a whole coherent adventure answer different questions. No retained source tests Orchard or establishes nutrition, developmental, educational, therapeutic or wellbeing outcomes for it. Entertainment need not acquire one of those promises to be a worthwhile purpose.

Methods and access

This is a focused narrative review, not a systematic review or meta-analysis. It reuses the original-source appraisals completed October 11, 2026 and reconciles Orchard's approved product definition on October 12. No external source was retrieved anew for this revision. Source selection covers motivation, playtime counterevidence, child digital play, interface timing and first-party exploration alternatives. Evidence was not pooled across ages, settings or outcomes.

The motivation PDF and original playtime article received full-text appraisal. UNICEF's official project summary, investigators' account, developer descriptions and Microsoft guidance were readable; UNICEF's full phase-two report was not available. Source-specific findings are distinguished from EAG's interpretation and creative intentions. No independent replication, table reanalysis, comprehensive correction/retraction search, product test or participant study is claimed. The September report's access record belongs to that earlier review; it is not a claim about October access.

The retained findings concern different populations and outcomes. They do not supply a common effect scale or a measured game-world result.

References

- **A0. Education Angel Group.** Snacks Orchard product definition, reconciled October 12, 2026. Defines intended scope, not implementation or effectiveness. Entity context.
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- **S3. UNICEF Innocenti.** Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children. Official project Methods, Findings and funding disclosure; April 2024 report landing page. Full phase-two report unavailable for appraisal. Project; Report landing page.
- **S4. Homer, Plass and Froehlich (April 30, 2024).** Can Digital Games Enhance Children's Well-being? Intervention paragraphs and findings bullets; investigators' summary. Account.
- **S5. Adam Robinson-Yu.** A Short Hike. Undated developer description, accessed October 11, 2026. Official site.
- **S6. ustwo games.** Alba: A Wildlife Adventure. Undated About/Features descriptions, accessed October 11, 2026. Official site.
- **S7. Microsoft.** Xbox Accessibility Guideline 116: Time limits. Goal, Overview and Implementation guidelines; page update label March 4, 2026, accessed October 11, 2026. Official guidance.