

i.play Offers Video Game-like Playground Equipment

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The i.play system combines interactive electronics with conventional playground equipment to encourage young people to exercise. Source: Playdale.

For children of today’s generation, swings and slides don’t seem to cut it anymore—not when you have an Xbox and Playstation in your living room. In an attempt to curb the rising childhood obesity rates partially associated with indoor electronics, researchers in the UK have designed an outdoor playground unit based on the concepts of video games.

Called i.play, or “intelligent play,” the electronic unit can make a high-tech addition to nearly any existing playground, says developer Playdale. Intended for children ages eight and above, as well as adults, wheelchair users and individuals with impaired hearing or vision, i.play encourages “stealth exercise”—exercise that feels like fun.

The i.play unit consists of a hexagonal court with three curved bars that form the skeleton of a dome. Each bar has a high, low, and mid-positioned activity switch to encourage a whole body aerobic workout that helps build muscular strength, stamina, hand-eye coordination, reaction time, agility and flexibility.

The i.play unit audibly tells a player when to activate a switch, an LED on the switch flashes, and the faster the player gets to the switch, the higher the score. Players activate the switch by pushing, pulling, pressing, spinning, turning, or stamping. Like many a video game, the game ends when a player loses three lives (by activating the wrong switch or moving too slow), or by completing all five levels, which is beating the game.

The game can be played in groups as well as individually. For groups of up to six, each player gets a number. The first player, chosen by the system, makes a sequence of three switches. Then the i.play unit nominates the next player, who repeats the sequence. Once all the players have successfully repeated the sequence, another switch is added, etc.

“The placement of activity switches is an important aspect of the design as we want to get users to perform movements requiring a large range of motion to progressively higher levels of physical exertion,” said i.play co-inventor Phil Hodgkins in a recent [press release](#).

The i.play system can also intelligently adjust to children’s performance, making the unit an alternative to team sports because it is competitive yet inclusive. [i.play’s Web site](#) notes an 11% decline in the number of young people playing sports at school, as well as a lack of cheap exercise options, that i.play aims to fill. Two i.play systems are already in use in Leicester and Barrow in Furness.

Playdale developed i.play in conjunction with Progressive Sports Technologies, a spinout company from Loughborough University. Other features of the system include its fully solar-powered design, programmable software, and like a game console, multiple levels of difficulty and statistics that allow players to monitor their performance both during and after the game.

And if that still doesn't excite gamers, players can win a free iPod Shuffle in a monthly drawing for logging their scores on an online league table.

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