Edutainment Centers as an Educational Phenomenon: The Case of KidZania

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Abstract

Edutainment centers, i.e. centers that both educate and entertain, have sprung up across the globe since the 1970s. At the end of the 20th century, a new type of such centers emerged: interactive cities for children, KidZania being the first of its kind and the most global one. Through the example of KidZania, this study examines the characteristics of interactive cities that have made them popular among children and their parents as well as the role of such parks in today's urban learning ecosystems. The paper also explores how the relationship between entertainment and education and the one between the commercial and educational components of edutainment centers affect the current state and development prospects of the sector.

The last third of the 20th century was marked by the emergence of theme parks (e.g. Legoland), science museums (e.g. Boston Children's Museum, Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie), and other centers combining education and entertainment—the so-called edutainment centers—across the world's major economies. Edutainment is defined as activities that bring together learning and gratification of curiosity, whereby learners actively acquire knowledge and experience. Edutainment characteristics include illustrative substantiation of the value of knowledge, independence in the learning process, learning through play and visual stimulation, a friendly environment, and flexibility of interactions. Edutainment centers are becoming an important element of the service sector and the economics of impressions, shaping a new image of modern urban environment for local population as well as tourists.

At the end of the 20th century, a new segment of the edutainment industry emerged: interactive cities for children. They are classified as location-based edutainment with a strong commercial element: different careers are illustrated through the example of specific businesses which present their products or services [Rusman, Ismail 2020].

Even though Russia's first edutainment center—the House of Entertaining Science—was established by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s, it was only in the 2010s that this sector began to gather momentum. As of today, Russia has over 90 science museums and over 40 interactive cities of varying size and quality [Kosaretsky, Kudryavtseva, Fiofanova 2018].

There has been a consistent demand for edutainment services. However, research on edutainment centers and interactive cities in particular is very scarce and mainly focused on the business models of such centers and the factors of their economic success. While visiting education centers, children experience consumer socialization by gaining product and brand knowledge, shopping knowledge and skills (shopping scripts), retail store knowledge, and transaction knowledge. There is a shift in brand preferences toward the sponsored brands [Arthur, Sherman 2016]. Theme park experiences are analyzed from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Success of such parks is understood as their ability to induce positive emotions by means of scripted interactions, behavior control, atmosphere design, and spatial design [Cabanas 2020]. Studies exploring KidZania as the best-known interactive city and its commercial success attach specific importance to its global reach and adaptation of the original concept to local cultural contexts [Di Pietro et al. 2017]. KidZania is regarded as a modern multilevel service ecosystem that involves children and families, employees, investors, franchisees, industry partners, schools, governments, and local communities. The KidZania business model is two-fold: on the one hand, it is a family and schools edutainment center where kids role-play and can get a sense of life as an adult. On the other hand, KidZania is a new marketing media for brands [Lonsway 2016]. The in-

terplay of learning and entertainment in the KidZania model is interpreted as a factor increasing customer loyalty and visitor engagement [Marsh, Bloom 2014]. KidZania enfolds immersive environment design, leveraging environmental immersion as an "interactive publicity" opportunity for companies who partner with KidZania and creating emotionally profitable spatial experiences for children.

The question about what exactly could be the educational component of edutainment centers has been rarely addressed in research literature and debate so far. There are few publications thoroughly exploring KidZania's potential as a specific format of education or practices to actualize that potential. KidZania is described as an informal learning environment in which children can practice various skills. Some researchers believe that skills learned in KidZania, such as money management skills, have the same value as those learned in school. Studies examining KidZania as a learning format discuss the advantages and limitations of learning in such environments and analyze the characteristics of play as a learning medium as well as the balance of free and supervised play [Cabanas 2020; Tagg, Wang 2016].

This study provides a detailed analysis of the educational potential of edutainment centers using the data on KidZania as the first, the largest, and the most global edutainment center. The fundamental components of the KidZania business model and concept have been borrowed by other interactive cities (Kidlandia, Minopolis, and others).

Founded in 1999 by Xavier López Ancona and Luis Javier Laresgoiti, KidZania is currently a franchise. KidZania parks for children aged from 4 to 14–16 now operate all around the world: in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Indonesia, Japan, etc.

KidZania represents a complex of role-play locations, or establishments, that are dedicated to specific activities and professions (airlines, bank, plant, etc.), each with a thematic setting. As envisioned by the creators, every KidZania park is themed as a country with its own history and attributes: national flag, government, currency, economics, traditions, and a common system of values including the rights "to Be, to Know, to Create, to Share, to Care, and to Play". Children become citizens of the "country": they receive a passport, "work" (take part in role-play games in various locations, where they learn how the city and businesses are organized), get a sense of different careers, pay taxes, make purchases, open bank accounts, etc. They also engage in scripted activities, "official" (e.g. a parade) or "spontaneous" (e.g. a fire).

Analysis of the educational potential of interactive cities is performed in this article to answer the following questions:

• Which skills and experiences are interactive cities focused on in the first place, and which tools and practices do they employ for that purpose?
• What role do such centers play in the learning environments of present-day urban children?

Various sources of data are used to consider the perspectives of different stakeholders and examine the practices used in KidZania: the concept description from KidZania's official website — to analyze the center's officially stated vision and mission; observations in KidZania parks — to analyze the tools and practices used; interviews with parents of interactive city visitors and with KidZania staff members — to get a sense of the meanings that they attach to visiting the park; and quantitative data on the popularity of different establishments within the park — to get the idea about children's experiences and their limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing how edutainment centers fulfill their educational function involves solving two problems:

- Examining the educational potential of edutainment centers;
- Providing a rationale for including edutainment centers as organized experiences into the learning environment—"an environment of personality development opportunities" [Froumin, Elkonin 1993].

It would not be unreasonable to discuss edutainment centers' educational potential and its characteristics within the framework of theories interpreting education in the categories of experiences and emotions rather than restricting it to knowledge acquisition. Theoretical framework of the present study relies upon the works of John Dewey, who approached learning as a continuous process of reconstruction of experience. He also argued that the educator must first of all arrange the conditions for students' fruitful experiences, underlining the importance of students' active participation in the formation of such experiences. An experience is a practical activity or an observation establishing the relationship between an individual's actions and their consequences [Dewey 2000]. Dewey attached a lot of attention to experiences in the process of learning, in particular to the role of positive emotions in the formation of experiences and the methods of inducing them.

In Russian literature, a similar role is assigned to the concept of trying (*proba*), to which Elkonin and Polivanova assign the critical role in child development. Trying is understood as safe and reversible activities [Polivanova 2000] that allow children to role-play behaviors in a quasi-real environment, "experience" their own actions, and try themselves. Trying is the foundation of subjectivation as the process of becoming a subject and internalizing an ability. The best part of KidZania's educational content could possibly be determined by providing children with the opportunity to try themselves in different quasi-professional contexts.

Edutainment center visitors engage in new experiences through play in controlled or scripted situations. Scripts set the context, making

visitors face realistic action choices. Emotional state of visitors is a special focus of edutainment center designers. Edutainment practices are designed to attract visitors, induce positive emotions, maintain children's attention, and stimulate their natural curiosity through emotion. Researchers regard theme parks as paradigmatic and representative examples of emotional environments [Chytry 2012; Newell 2012], i. e. environments in which emotions play the decisive role in understanding the material and symbolic content of the environment and determine the patterns of individual behavior and communication practices.

Our analysis of the role of edutainment centers in the learning environment is also premised on the contemporary learning environment theories and the ecosystem approach, which postulate that education is not restricted to traditional formal institutions such as kindergarten or school and interactions with professional educators. Children learn in the "environment of organized experiences, not organizations"—which are more or less structured, specifically arranged, and clearly distinguishable [Froumin, Kosaretsky, Leshukov 2016; Polivanova et al. 2020].

Methods KidZania's publicly accessible constitutional documents were analyzed and interviews with four KidZania managers were conducted to identify the conceptual foundations of the KidZania model and operation practices. Overt observations were performed to examine how interactions between children and staff members are organized, with due consideration of scripts (interaction algorithms), the role of supervisors, and the use of job-specific equipment and tools. Training courses for KidZania supervisors were attended to get a better sense of the methodology behind experience design.

Semi-structured interviews with 15 parents were conducted to describe their expectations and attitudes regarding their children's experiences in KidZania. The interview results were processed using the method of thematic analysis.

Results Analysis of the data collected allows identifying and describing two categories of KidZania's key characteristics that determine its role in the learning environment: values / value orientations and means of achieving them.

Judging by KidZania's constitutional documents and interviews with its representatives, KidZania activities are designed to provide children with knowledge and experience that can be applied in learning and daily life. Emphasis is placed on financial literacy, strategies of spending the money earned — shopping, saving, charity — and the idea of relevant institutions. One of the tools to develop financial literacy is KidZania's policy on "salaries" that children are paid for "working" at the establishments.

"Our 'salaries' are not very high: if a kid wants to buy a toy vehicle, they will have to come a few times. This is not frugality; this is our philosophy to make them understand that money is hard to make. [A child] also becomes a bit more serious, knowing that they have to earn and save money. About 60–70% of children make savings — and that's financial literacy and understanding how everything works."[1]

KidZania's practices are also oriented toward developing civic literacy in children, who learn the city's laws, receive and use their own passports, pay taxes, and perform other civic duties through role play. Because the concept of KidZania is invariant across the cities and countries, it basically conveys the orientation toward the global values of openness, nonviolence, etc.

Obviously, realistic attributes of different professions and role-playing of various jobs indicate KidZania's great career guidance potential. KidZania offers a very broad range of careers, which is updated on a regular basis, expanding children's awareness beyond what they see in their immediate surroundings or learn at school. However, KidZania staff members protest against classifying the park as a career guidance center. Assistance with career choices is not considered a priority. Children learn about professions and develop certain attitudes toward them, but this is not regarded as intended or controllable effects. KidZania representatives point out that most visitors are under 12 years of age, which is too early for career counseling; besides, occupations represented in the park are mostly traditional — police officers, firefighters, and doctors — so career guidance opportunities are quite limited. Finally, positioning of KidZania as a career guidance center may affect parents' interest for particular establishments or the park in general, thereby reducing children's opportunity to have adult-like experiences. The range of professions is also restricted by the KidZania business model to the ones that are in demand among sponsoring brands.

"You know, few parents will be happy if their child wants to become a police officer after visiting KidZania."

Immersion in real-life jobs, or rather in the context of employment as such is approached by KidZania creators as a means of solving the more important tasks of socialization and moving into adulthood. Professional as well as financial and civic activities are social practices that are part of becoming an adult; participation in them develops relevant experience as well as decision-making, cooperation, and communication skills.

"I would say that the key skill children acquire here is the one of making choices, I mean understanding exactly what they want. <…> For

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[1] Citations here and elsewhere in this article are taken from the interviews with KidZania staff members. .

me, KidZania <...> is about making decisions in specific contexts: where to go, whether to spend or earn money, or maybe make savings to buy something later at the department store."

KidZania representatives emphasize that those adult-life experiences are adapted for children and made easier and safer ("We have no ambition of making adults out of them; we don't place all the burdens of responsibility like mortgage or bosses upon them")—just as safe and adapted as establishment activities ("you cannot melt real ore [at the metallurgical plant]"). The center's goal is to introduce children into adulthood by allowing them to role-play and try themselves at making independent decisions in a safe environment. As a result, children acquire knowledge about the "adult life" and get a sense of how it works by learning different ways of earning money and making their first decisions on how to use it.

Both the underlying concept of "citizens of an adultless city who make political decisions" and the particular activities in different career environments are designed to develop children's sense of autonomy and provide them with experience of successful problem solving.

"And you do actually believe that you belong there, everything's made just for you, and you're a cool self-sufficient adult who is separated as much as possible from your parents. You've got your own money that you can spend or save or, I don't know, present your earned toy car or doll to someone else."

"This is where you decide what to do and where no one seems to influence your decisions."

"[A child has a chance] to try things, to feel independent, and to listen to what they actually want and to what extent they are ready to insist on where they want to go or why they want to go there."

Of major significance is experience of success, when

"they do something themselves: they are not made or taught to do it, but they are told about how it works in real life and they do it on their own, and they most probably succeed."

"New knowledge about oneself and the world around is exactly about edutainment, learning through play and positive emotions. It's about being happy and experiencing success. This is indeed what matters the most; <...> it is highly important that a child gains something and experiences a wow effect."

KidZania's major instrumental attributes include realistic environment, play, interactivity, supervision, and elaborated scripts.

Realism is achieved by designing the park as a city with the basic elements of an urban environment: government office, central square, post office, bank, etc. Most of them also serve to simulate the career (employment) environment. A special focus is placed on realism, thoroughly elaborated design, and strong attention to detail. For example, locations may feature such "flagship" elements as an airplane fuselage, real vehicles, sett pavement, etc. When interviewed, KidZania representatives underlined that deliberate use of more expensive and better-quality materials than those of competitors is not just an indicator of a higher-end product but first of all a key prerequisite for immersive experiences. The physical design of the environment helps children grow into the roles of citizens or employees in a specific organization. Children fight real fires, cook real burgers, broadcast radio programs aired in the city, create cartoons, change tires on a race car, etc. Realism is essential for children engagement and as a source of positive emotions.

> "KidZania should leave people open-mouthed, which it actually does. Any child or parent should come and say, 'Wow! This is just... there's even the sky!' I mean, for me it's decisive, when there's even the sky."

Collaboration with brands helps achieve the desired degree of realism in the interactive city, where children can see the business signs and other brand components that they often come across in real cities.

Play is the key mode of existence in KidZania. All children's activities involve role-playing real jobs and imply active engagement, trying, and gaining personal experience.

> "When you don't only deliver the information orally but let the child press the button and *gain* something, their knowledge becomes more solid."

Children's activities in every location always involve interaction with other children playing different roles within the specific occupation. Children work as a team and perform team-oriented tasks. Even when they are given different tasks, they can see what others are doing.

Children's activities in the city in general and in locations in particular are controlled by specifically trained supervisors. When interacting with children, a supervisor must focus on the four effects that KidZania seeks to provide: new knowledge, positive emotions, the right values (different locations focus on different values, from politeness and mutual aid to caring about the environment), and experience of success (putting out a fire, making a pizza, removing an appendix). Supervisor's role is to administer the location-specific scripts as the duration of activities in every location is limited. However, supervisors should not ignore questions from children who show a keen interest in the profession.

Every child's visit to KidZania follows a script elaborated with due regard to the specific occupation. There are basic scripts for jobs offered across all KidZania parks, and when an occupation is restricted to one country, the script should be negotiated with the headquarters. Scripts are written by a team of staff members who visit the sponsoring businesses and get acquainted with the jobs offered by their production departments; after that, they adapt the scripts for children. Every script consists of the following steps:

- *Welcome*. Children are greeted and receive a security bracelet. Some children also have a KidZania passport, in which they receive stamps for participation in activities.
- *Acquaintance*. Every child tells their name, and the supervisor asks general questions, such as "How do KidZanians greet one another?" or "What kind of job do you want to try?"
- *Awareness assessment*. Supervisors asks a series of questions of increasing difficulty, such as "What does a/an [profession] do?", "What is the [profession attribute] for?", etc. and provides answers to the questions that children are unable to answer themselves.
- *Information sharing*. The supervisor tells about the profession using various visual aids.
- *Briefing*. The supervisor demonstrates what children will do and gives them safety instructions.
- *Independent work*. Children perform the tasks assigned by the supervisor under the supervisor's guidance. For instance, children who have chosen to role-play a race car technician will change tires, fill up a gas tank, and adjust the wing. Meanwhile, autonomy is limited by the script: children cannot do anything beyond the activities preplanned for the location. They engage in adult-like activities that are normally inaccessible to children outside KidZania—supervised, yet without direct assistance from adults.
- *Monitoring and feedback*. The supervisor checks the work done and collects feedback on children's understanding and knowledge assimilation by leading them into reflection with questions such as "What have you done today?", "Who have you been?" "What is [profession attribute]?" In addition, the supervisor asks children whether they have any questions.
- *Reward ("salary")*. Children earn "kidZos" (local currency) from completing most activities. However, there are some highly entertaining jobs that children should pay kidZos to try (e. g. the role of Secret Agent includes an assisted jump off a high building which is very popular among children).

Interviews with parents allow reconstructing their perceptions of KidZania opportunities and their own expectations from a visit to an edutainment center. Parents' statements provide a balanced representation of KidZania's educational and entertainment characteristics. Parents are

completely aware of the hybrid format of edutainment centers and understand that KidZania is not an institution offering extracurricular activities (ECA). Most parents value the educational component more than the entertaining one. Of all the learning opportunities provided by KidZania, parents give the highest priority to the development of soft skills, in particular autonomy and communication skills, and the opportunity to learn about a number of professions within a short period of time, which is normally impossible to do as part of a long-term oriented ECA program or may be challenging outside the specifically designed environment of KidZania.

> "A cooking workshop is about freedom and doing what is not allowed in my home kitchen."

> "They are granted autonomy, learn to communicate with adults and other children, and develop a sense of self-discipline."

> "Apart from getting some basic knowledge and information about a career, they also learn to get over the fear of speaking and presenting themselves, work in a team, and interact with other people who are of course all different. And then, they develop a sense of autonomy: when I had to go for a couple of hours, he stayed home alone — and that's where spatial orientation comes into play. He knows he's on his own and has to manage somehow."

> "For a child to understand that money doesn't come easy and you have to make an effort."

Parents harbor no illusions about the depth of knowledge or retention of skills acquired at an edutainment center.

> "I do realize it's a game. Many of those things are not as pleasant in the adult life which is full of routines. But kids can at least get the idea of what they might like."

Parents' expectations from KidZania are not focused on the outcome as it usually happens with school and often with ECA. Parents realize that learning in KidZania is about trying, not completing a process, and thus do not tend to examine it critically.

> "We come here for productive entertainment, not for critical evaluation."

> "Knowledge can be given at home but it will not be complete without experience. Experience is part of knowledge, so everything you know in theory should be supported with practice. Kids especially, they perceive the world through senses. Until they touch it and feel it, they

will never understand. Of course, they should try everything themselves at least in role play."

"It doesn't give 100% knowledge, naturally, but the strategy is just right and twenty minutes is just enough as children lose focus very soon. If it takes too long, they will get bored. Facts are delivered very well and supported by experiments, so kids get really involved. Within those 20 minutes, they get the very essence out of it. It's like a children's encyclopedia: one page per fact, no more. Of course, you can keep reading on and on, but it's enough to excite your curiosity."

Nevertheless, parents regard the knowledge and experiences gained in KidZania in the context of their children's future, as a tool for making study and career choices. Future implications are the top value in visiting KidZania for parents.

"I wanted to show him the opportunity to plunge into the world of professions, to understand how it works, to live through this experience. You'd better get a sense of what you wanna do in the early years, rather than grow up and have no idea about anything. When you already have the idea, you have more opportunities."

"Having tried everything, it will be easier to make choices and set goals in the future."

"Well, I hope, beside broadening the mind, a child will have an idea of different careers, and maybe it will help them avoid mistakes. Because sometimes parents want their kid to become something, or the kid wants to be, say, a firefighter by looking up to someone, and they obtain relevant education and then realize it's not what they want — just because they have no idea and no experience, they've never tried anything."

Conclusions and Discussion

Whatever perspective we take on the edutainment center — i. e. whether we examine its self-positioning, design of its activities, or parents' perceptions of its effects — experience remains its central component and most important value. KidZania seeks to create reproducible and script-controllable opportunities for new experiences in major thematic (financial literacy, occupation, civic engagement, charity) and meta-subject (communication, collaboration, autonomy) domains. Children gain unique realistic experiences associated with positive emotions, a clear sense of effort, and joy from achieving an outcome, even though in scripted role play. Tools for creating such experiences include conceptual spatial design of immersive environments, the use of play as the basis of any activity, and careful supervision focused on positive emotions, high expectations, role modelling, and positive feedback.

The specific value of experiences acquired in KidZania consists in their motivational potential, i. e. ability to spark interest and lay the foundation for further investigation into the subject or activity. However, a legitimate question needs to be answered: to what extent are experience quality and productivity affected by KidZania's control tools such as scripts, activity duration, and supervisor's techniques that limit children's free play and, consequently, their agency in constructing their personal experiences [Cabanas 2020; Tagg, Wang 2016]? Further research is certainly needed to get a better understanding of the phenomenon of experience and its role in children's education: both qualitative studies that assess children's perceptions of experience and quantitative ones to measure real short- and long-term educational effects in specific thematic domains.

KidZania's effectiveness in creating opportunity for experiences is what defines its role in the learning ecosystem of a modern city in the first place and attracts the target audience. Parents seek to provide their children with conditions conducive to various positive experiences. They realize the insufficiency of knowledge and skills taught in school and the limited potential of school — its learning environment, teaching methods, and teachers' attitudes — for securing children's all-round development, socialization, and adulting. They understand that school curricula remain narrow and formalized, i. e. test-oriented. Besides, they can see the school format failing to maintain curiosity, cognitive interest, and motivation in children. Today's families as well as the modern education system express a demand for developing and maintaining children's motivation for learning [Polivanova et al. 2020].

Parents are on the outlook for opportunities to provide their children with new experiences outside school, in particular as part of ECA [Polivanova et al. 2020]. However, the format of ECA — relative duration, regularity, schedules, obligations to assume, and often the reproduction of methods and roles typical of school education — also sets limits to meeting parents' demand. It could be for this reason that the KidZania concept has been increasingly popular among parents and their children.

Furthermore, the distinguishing feature of KidZania's target audience is the focus on children's engagement in educational practices and control over the productivity of time use combined with concerns about sensory overload [Kosaretsky, Kudryavtseva, Fiofanova 2018]. This is where the interest for formats that are not purely entertaining comes from. Such parents prefer "productive entertainment" over "pure entertainment" and "an extra portion" of learning.

Therefore, it is not KidZania's formal status but parents' subjective attitudes, goals, and objectives that determine KidZania's place in the learning environment. KidZania is not part of every urban family's learning environment, which depends on sociocultural factors (family education and cultural capital) and financial situation. There are

times when KidZania is part of a child's subjective learning environment, while remaining objectively inaccessible.

There are reasons for talking about KidZania as a unique element of the learning environment, yet whether KidZania is unique *per se* and has a good edutainment potential is arguable. Other formats of edutainment centers can probably boast more or less the same opportunities. Comparative assessment of different edutainment models and formats to identify their common features and differences and find correlations with the learning and development objectives and families' demand is a promising area of research on modern learning ecosystems.

As part of this research, it would be reasonable to pay attention to the tension between the entertainment and education orientations of edutainment centers, i. e. between the business goals and financially-centered development strategies on the one hand and the long-term vision prioritizing customer engagement over returns on investment on the other hand. It could be assumed that this tension results from the need to get higher and faster returns while at the same time achieving a level of service quality that will improve customer engagement and guarantee returning visitors. Creation and maintenance of such centers is impossible today without heavy investments. This is why the model of KidZania as well as other edutainment centers implies not only chargeable services but also affiliation with the world's leading brands. This position makes KidZania vulnerable to criticism. In particular, KidZania is blamed for limiting the range of jobs that children can role-play, thereby shaping a distorted idea of the labor market. For instance, a researcher from the United Arab Emirates laments that experience of role-playing a McDonald's cashier is irrelevant for Arab children because local population doesn't work in McDonald's [Baker 2014]. An even more essential drawback of KidZania is that it offers no opportunity to learn about careers of the future, which is growing more and more important nowadays.

This way, KidZania faces the need to cooperate with schools, universities, and various communities. Such cooperation could also be of interest to regional education systems on the lookout for additional resources, first of all learning environment infrastructure and equipment. There have been precedents of collaboration networks, but they are all local.

Another line of tension concerns the balance of real and virtual edutainment formats. Promising areas of research include analysis of the immersion, engagement, and cooperation effects and the specific aspects of emotional experience generation and manifestation in KidZania as compared to virtual reality environments. It was only yesterday that optimism about VR edutainment was high, but the distance learning experience induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has made personal interactions and "live play" the greatest value of all.

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