Can placing fun in the national cycle network motivate families to cycle more often?

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Digital games and media are being harnessed for educational purposes, with some now being used to promote sustainable behaviour. Such approaches exploit current trends in technology use and the popularity of digital gaming to encourage new activities or to change people's behaviour. This paper presents recent research which has studied the potential of placing such games (here in the form of 'missions') within the National Cycle Network (NCN); the rationale in this approach being that this could be a motivating factor in encouraging greater use of the cycle network, and consequently help in promoting cycling and active travel more generally. The main question addressed by this study is whether the intrinsic motivational properties of game-playing have value in the context of travel behaviour change. The project involved in-depth ethnographic work with a sample of 64 participants (comprised of 12 family interviews and two school focus groups).

The findings suggest that there are key barriers to family cycling which it is unlikely that games alone can address; in particular: a lack of confidence on bikes and (parental) concerns for safety linked to the fragmented nature of the network and the need to often cycle on the road. However this research also demonstrates the positive qualities of cycling together as a family, which has implications for improving the experience of using NCN routes and encouraging greater uptake if key barriers can be attended to. Children and adults enjoyed the simple feeling of being on their bike, and the suggestion for increasing enjoyment of the NCN was to pose challenges that involved being on the bike: such as having options to divert from the main, direct path and explore areas with ramps, berms, banked corners and chicanes; and challenges structured around the activity of cycling itself, including using gears, riding one-handed etc. Finally, attractively landscaped areas at which to stop, rest, and explore along the route were also suggested. The key message to be taken from this study is that improving NCN routes through the addition of challenges or games en-route is not a quick-fix cure-all, however it could fit well into the current toolkit of approaches to improving cycling infrastructure, and further contribute to the NCN providing a more engaging, fun, and desirable cycling experience for users.