

UXkids case study:



A model example of 21st century-education

It's 2014 - and we are in the middle of a digital era. Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise that a lot of companies have recognized the potential of digital media for entertaining and educating children.

However, only a handful realizes the challenges that come with designing for this special and diverse age group. Squla - an online learning platform for elementary school children - is one of them.

Squla is an initiative by the serious games developer FutureWhiz. The platform was introduced to the Dutch market in 2010. Since then, Squla has grown to be a successful company with almost 60 000 subscribers.

The team behind Squla brings together experts from the educational field, designers with a great feel for young target groups, skilled marketers and a visionary product management team.

Their enthusiasm, eye for the detail, and their love for both the product and for kids provide all the necessary assets for continuously improving and growing their product.

There is always room for improvement

Initially, Squla - like most companies that develop digital media for kids - relied on the experience and expertise of their team to design a product that children would love and know how to use.

This has brought them a long way. With 60 000 users, the Squla website has become the most popular online learning platform in the Netherlands.

From the very beginning, Squla focused on high-quality content and learning methods that match the Dutch elementary school curriculum. Also, the design is very child-friendly and kids can choose between a wide range of fun, educational and engaging online games and films. With Squla, learning definitely is fun.

"The collaboration with UXkids was very pleasant and professional.

Their approach is profound and focussed and the results were clear and actionable - which is a must in my view."

Niels Schultz, Head of Product at Squla

At the same time, Squla realized that there is room for improvement. The website was designed for kids - there is no doubt about that. However, it was not designed with kids. Even though the Squla team always had the best intentions for the website, the site was never thoroughly tested with children.

That's the reason, why Squla has decided to engage in UX research. By involving children in the design process - new and existing ideas and concepts can be validated, ensuring a great user experience of the final product.

This way, Squla can be sure that kids will (1) get the most out of the new website, (2) like Squla and tell their friends about it, and (3) continue to use Squla in the long term.

Benefits of UX research

Without involving the actual user in this process, there is always a chance that design decisions don't match the expectations, needs and abilities of the kids. This will eventually show in the user reaction to the final product.

For example, kids might not fully understand the interface and therefore not know where to find valuable content.

They might miss out on a lot of fun features, because the interaction doesn't match their level of experience.

Or they don't get hooked to the product, because the design doesn't match their expectations.

UXkids - Big experiences for small people

With the above goals in mind, Niels Schultz, product manager at Ssula, reached out to UXkids.

The journey started with an initial meeting at the Ssula headquarters with Niels, Liselotte, and myself. From experiences with other companies, we were prepared to go far afield to sell the idea of Child-Centered Design (CCD) and carefully evaluate possible scenarios for a collaboration.

As it turned out, Ssula was not like most companies. Niels knew exactly what he was looking for and there was no convincing needed, except maybe of the fact that - despite the lack of references - UXkids was indeed the right partner for this project.

Before long, both parties agreed to start with a first, small scale UX research. The scope of this initial collaboration was a usability test with kids from group 4 and 5 (age 7-9).

Preparing & conducting first UX research project for Ssula

The main research questions were defined in close collaboration with Ssula:

RQ1: Does the interaction design of the Ssula website match the experiences, needs, expectations, and abilities of kids age 7 - 9?

RQ2: Does the visual design of the Ssula website appeal to kids age 7-9?

RQ3: How can the Ssula website be improved for kids age 7 - 9?

Due to the complexity of the website, this initial study focuses on the homepage, the overall structure and the navigation of the website.

The research questions above were divided into 5 main categories of interest:

- Overall understanding
- Navigation & interaction
- Instructions & Feedback
- Consistency
- Visual design

"It's great to see UXkids being the first UX research agency in the Netherlands that is specialised in user experience design for kids.

The Ssula website has changed a lot over the last four years - with new features being added constantly. A high user engagement and a user-friendly design are key to keeping our players enthusiast over time.

UXkids helps us a lot to set priorities for continuously improving our site."

Niels Schultz, Head of Product at Ssula

For each category, we defined different, more specific sub-research questions. The sub-research questions were translated into child-friendly test questions. We conducted one on one usability tests with 9 kids from 4th and 5th grade (age 7-9). This allowed us to get the best insights into how kids perceive the website and how they interact with it.

General Design Guidelines

While some findings are very specific for the Squla website, others are more generic and consistent with general design guidelines for kids age 7-9.

For example, kids are not very good online readers. Their reading skills are moderate and therefore they have difficulties scanning text the way adults do. This makes reading much more time consuming and frustrating, and kids try to avoid it.

Also, kids prefer visual above textual information. Reason for this is (1) their limited reading ability and (2) the fact that they can remember visual cues much better than text. Visual information allows them to recognize content and better navigate a site.

Kids age 8-10 don't read instructions. They like being the 'expert' who knows what to do. Follow-up messages to instruct and offer feedback are important for this age group.

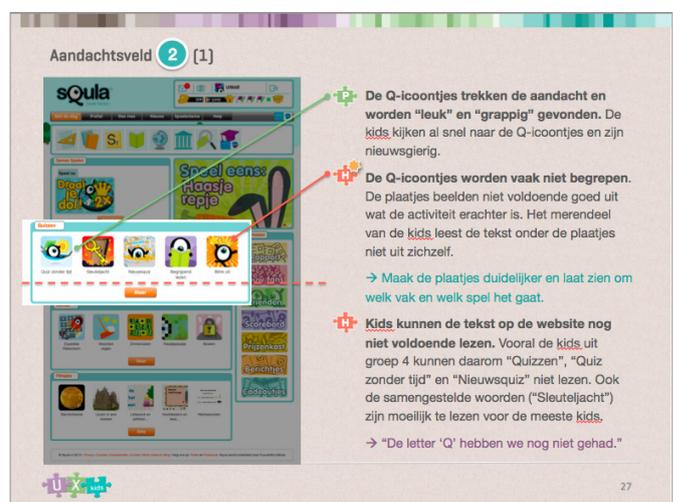
Kids get motivated by challenges. Activities that require dexterity, skill and accomplishment get kids hooked in the long term.

Before age 10, kids don't engage in scrolling out of routine. Rather, they need a clear trigger to scroll and discover content below the fold.

With regard to the limited attention span of children in this age group, each session was scheduled for 30 minutes. The research took place in a quiet room at Squla headquarters. The test setup matched that of a classical portable usability lab.

Analyzing and reporting the results

The results were very consistent and allowed us to draw clear conclusions about both the usability and the user experience of the Squla website for kids age 7-9.



Findings were reported in a clear and visual way.

First of all, it became clear that **there was no significant difference between kids from grade 4 and grade 5**. This was an important finding.

Currently, the Squla website has two different layouts - one for kids from 1st to 3rd grade and the other one for kids in grade 4-8. Squla is considering to introduce a third layout. This finding confirmed the assumption that kids from 4th and 5th grade should have access to the same layout.



All findings were reported with a rating: H = high priority / M = medium priority / L = low priority / P = positive finding / O = observation.

All **kids liked the visual design of the website.** They thought it was “funny”, “interesting”, and designed especially for them. The kids were all enthusiastic about the overall Squla design and the Squla “Q”. They liked the fact that they can practice by playing games, collect coins and points, and buy presents.



Findings were structured in the same order the kids explored the website. This allowed us to present the results in a clear and meaningful way.

We also noticed that **all kids approached the website in a similar way** - we assume this is due to the strong focus on visual information of this age group. This allowed us to divide the Squla website into 7 different areas of attention.

For Squla this is very interesting, especially since it did not match how they expected kids to approach the site. Knowing what draws the kids’ attention will help Squla rearrange content in a more effective way.

Next, it became clear that **kids age 7 - 9 are overwhelmed by the number of choices** they get presented on the homepage. Because of this kids don’t see the most important choice on the homepage - the one between subjects and game categories. For Squla, this means they should think about keeping it much more simple for this age group.

Also, the **kids need more instructions and feedback.** It’s not always clear where the kids are in the site, what they can or are supposed to do, how they can go back, or how they can recover from mistakes. Kids in this age group have a limited memory span. Instructions and feedback should be offered to them directly at the moment of interaction.

Last but not least, **kids prefer visual instructions above text.** The ratio between text and visual information doesn’t match the expectations and reading abilities of the tested age group. There are several ways how Squla can switch the focus from text heavy to visually guided instructions.

Squla and UX research

This collaboration with Squla was a great experience and learning field - both for Squla and for us.

The positive energy from the Squla team and the eagerness to learn more about their product formed the ideal circumstances for this research.

At all times, there was a steady communication flow, ensuring that both parties were on the same page. For UXkids, the interpersonal connections are just as important for the success of a project as the professional aspect.

The Squla website is already a great platform for kids. The fact that the Squla team is open for feedback and looking to continuously improve their product is trendsetting.