

Keeping Myself eSafe

Information for Teachers

Online Gaming

Online Gaming

Although computer games are not a new phenomenon, the growth of the internet has given birth to a new type of computer game where players can play simultaneously with thousands of other players around the world.

In the world of MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), also known simply as online games, players can meet other players, become friends, engage in quests and fight shoulder to shoulder against evil.

Most games allow players to create online identities as game characters, so that they can explore virtual worlds and complete tasks. In carrying out these tasks (usually known as quests) players can gain virtual money, valuables and experience – as opposed to points in a more traditional computer game. In World of Warcraft - one of the most popular collaborative online games - 'gold' is a form of currency used to buy and sell items from in-game suppliers or other players.

These virtual riches can then be spent on other in-game valuables and used in further quests and adventures. Some gamers, however, sell virtual game items for real-world money in markets such as eBay.

For some games, there is a user-created, online world where people use virtual currency to trade goods and services and buy personal property. In Second Life - a three-dimensional virtual community created by its residents - millions of Linden™ dollars change hands every month in exchange for virtual goods and services. These Linden dollars may then be bought and sold on the Lindex exchange for real currency.

The growing demand for in-game valuables and currencies, however, has also created a new type of fraudulent web activity that's sometimes called 'virtual crime.'

One of the most attractive features of playing collaborative online games is the ability to communicate with other players, no matter where they are in the world. Where computer games were once solitary activities, most MMORPGs have an online community that chats and sends instant messages during games.

The excitement of playing online games such as Halo, World of Warcraft and Lineage makes them highly attractive for young people. There are, however, a number of potential risks associated with playing online games.

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Risks

Addiction

Recent studies suggest that computer games can be highly addictive. Within the last few years, online gaming addiction has become a major clinical problem for some young people who may stay up late into the night, stop eating, and skip school just to play interactive online role-playing games. This can impair a young person's ability to concentrate and perform well at school.

While spending hours in front of a computer screen can adversely affect the physical health and wellbeing of young people, it can also diminish the frequency and quality of their 'offline' relationships with friends and peers.

Theft

Any valuable item in an online game can have a monetary equivalent in the real world and the growing demand for virtual items and currencies has led to an increase in cyber crime, where malicious users attempt to steal items from other players.

The player authorisation system (which verifies player authenticity) in most online games is based on a password system. This means that a player logging onto a game server has to enter his or her username and password. Once the server has identified the user, the player is allowed to enter the game.

If a malicious user gains access to someone else's password, items of value can be stolen easily. These items are put up for auction online and can be sold to other players for virtual or real money. A cyber criminal may sometimes even demand a ransom for the stolen items.

Malware

Many MMORG games have an online community that chats and sends instant messages during the games. Viruses may arrive as attachments in email messages or via instant messaging programs, and corrupt or malicious programs may be hidden in game files downloaded by players or software installed.

Malicious people may try to trick users into installing software that contains Trojan horses, viruses or worms which they then use to control that user's computer, monitor their online activities, or launch attacks against other computers.

Some malicious software, for example, directs users to fake websites offering bogus patches or game downloads that, in reality, are malicious software. Users may be enticed to visit bogus websites where they subsequently purchase in-game valuables or merchandise by debit and credit card, only to find later that they have been the victims of online fraud.

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Identity Theft

If malicious people gather information about a user from the profiles he or she creates in games or in other social networking software such as Bebo and Facebook, they may be able to use it to create accounts in that person's name, resell that information, or use it to access that person's financial accounts.

The growing problem of online fraud and identity theft is an unfortunate by-product of the popularity of online gaming and social networking websites.

Cyber grooming

Because online gaming websites are highly popular with children and young people, they attract sexual predators who use them to establish contact, often by posing as a young person. Most collaborative online games have a facility for players to chat and send instant messages during games, and this provides opportunities for predators to establish friendships and gain the confidence of young people with a view to grooming them for contact in the real world.

A predator will attempt to trick a young person into giving out personal details such as their IM address, email address, real name, mobile number and where they live.

Ultimately, the predator's aim is to persuade the young person to meet 'offline' with a view to sexual contact.

Inappropriate content

One of the growing concerns about internet gaming is the possible exposure of young people to content that is inappropriate for their age and stage of development. Many popular games contain portrayals of violent and sexual behaviour, while others celebrate anti-social or criminal activity. Viewing trivialised violence in a virtual world has been linked to marked increases in real life violence among young people.

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Online gambling

Online gambling has become more popular in recent years. A growing number of people play casino-like games, lotteries, and bet on sporting events. Like any form of gambling, the risks include addiction and the potential loss of money.

The use of online casinos by children under 18 is one of the biggest concerns associated with the gambling industry in the UK. While the use of sophisticated age verification software is a requirement of all licensed online casinos, it is relatively easy for someone under 18 to gain entry to a casino using false ID, since there is no actual requirement to appear in person.

Some unscrupulous online operators take advantage of the demand from young people by luring them into casinos, with the aim of encouraging gambling addictions that can last well into adulthood.

As in the case of adults who gamble, young people can suffer significant financial losses in online casinos.

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Safety Strategies

- 1) When you register for an online game, only supply information that you are happy to provide. Don't use your real name when setting up your account.
- 2) Never give out your personal details to anyone on the internet. This includes your messenger ID, email address, home address, mobile number and any pictures of you, your family or friends.
- 3) Be aware that sexual predators often try to make contact with young people through online games. You never know who you might be chatting to online, so be careful about what you say and the information you give to strangers.
- 4) Never agree to meet people in real life if you only know them from the game.
- 5) Never download files or content from people or sites that you aren't sure about. Even if the file comes from a friend, you must still be sure what the file is before opening it.
- 6) Make sure that your computer has up to date anti-virus and anti-spy software installed.
- 7) If you experience something online that makes you feel uncomfortable, upset or threatened, talk to someone you trust about it.
- 8) Use a strong password and never share it with anyone, apart from your parents. A random combination of numbers, letters and punctuation and over 8 characters long, is recommended.
- 9) Take care not to spend too long on a computer playing online games. It's not good for your health and you might lose contact with friends in the real world.
- 10) Don't attempt to join online gambling casinos. It's against the law to gamble if you are under 18 and gambling can lead to addiction and financial loss.

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