

# Gaming the system

## Introduction and background

**Gaming is now a key element of mainstream popular culture. It is predicted that the gaming industry will be worth \$180.1 billion by 2021, with an estimated 2.5 billion video gamers worldwide. Although gaming is also popular among adults, an estimated 93 percent of children in the UK aged 10 to 16 play video games. However, despite its dramatic increase in popularity, little is known by parents and policymakers about gaming and its culture.**

**In order to understand the potential benefits and risks of online gaming for children, this research from the Office of the Children's Commissioner explored children's experiences of the games they play.**

**Researchers conducted 6 focus groups, speaking to 29 children in total about their experiences of gaming. The children also filled out a five-day behaviour diary of their gaming activities. The games explored were Fortnite, Minecraft, FIFA, Roblox and Call of Duty, with each group focusing on one of these games. In addition to presenting the results of the research, this report makes a series of recommendations.**

## Key points

### The gaming landscape

- Gaming has, in recent years, moved from offline to online. Online gaming means that users can play multiplayer games with, and against, many different people across the world. It is often considered to be more rewarding than offline play, providing new rewards, more variety and more exciting challenges. Some games such as Fortnite are now played entirely online.
- Online gaming has become into one of the most profitable entertainment industries in the world, making up the bulk of gaming industry revenue.
- A number of games children are playing (e.g. Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto and Battlefield) are designed for adults; the average age of a gamer in the UK is 43. This fact, along with the online nature of gaming has led to a number of concerns.
- There are worries that over-exposure to video game content and the time which children spend gaming may have a damaging effect on their development and socialisation, a worry compounded by concerns about the length of time children spend playing. There is increasing concern about the potential for children to be negatively affected by violent imagery and other inappropriate content. The possible link between gaming and gambling, and the concurrent risk of addiction, is also a growing worry.
- Gaming is becoming increasingly monetised. For many games, purchasing the base-level game only unlocks a fraction of the gaming experience, with the option to spend more to improve gameplay. In-game purchases may enhance the look of a character, give you an advantage in the game (for example, weapons or characters), or allow you to progress in the game by using real money or that which is earned in-game. These extra purchases are vital to how 'free to play' games make money.

### Children's experiences of gaming

- Overall, the research found that younger children (aged 10 to 11) often spend 2 to 3 hours per day playing online games such as Fortnite, Roblox, Minecraft, Mario Kart and Skylanders, mainly after school and at the weekends. Older children (aged 15 to 16) spend around one to 3 hours per day playing games such as Rainbow Six Siege, FIFA, Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto online, and often have to balance this with other time-pressured activities such as revising or doing their homework.
- Play time varied from child-to-child depending on the devices to which they had access and time restrictions, which were often determined by parents. While some children have their own mobile phones, tablets, computers and TV consoles in their rooms, others are restricted to one or 2 devices.
- Most frequently, children are playing towards an in-game objective, such as unlocking new game features, advancing to the next level or being the last person standing. Children also use gaming to kill time while they wait to do another activity, for instance, going to football training or having dinner. In these instances, play tends to be more of a passive means to end boredom rather than an opportunity to actively work towards an objective.
- For most children, gaming is a part of their social lives and they often choose the types of games they play based on their friends' recommendations. Playing the same games as friends provides children with shared topics to chat about at school, as well as the opportunity to spend more time with friends when at home.
- Some children mention that advertisements have an impact on what games they play. For example, seeing a new game being played or endorsed by their favourite YouTuber encourages them to play it. Parental

permissions also impact the games children can and cannot play.

### The benefits and harms of online play

- Online gaming can enhance children's social interaction. Most social interaction is with people whom children already know. Across the sample, children say that their experience of online gaming is enhanced by the presence of others.
- In many cases, gaming helps to build friendships by providing a shared interest through which children can interact and bond. Most children play online games as part of a group of friends they know offline. Within these groups, gaming is a key topic of conversation. For example, the Roblox group mentioned that certain in-game moments become a topic of conversation at lunchtime at school.
- The quality of in-game social interactions was enhanced by the use of supporting technology. One of the FIFA groups reported that groups of up to 10 friends would use the Xbox app on their phone to have conversations while playing. Jacob, 14, said: "It's like a party". All children, bar those children in the Roblox group, also have headsets, allowing them to talk freely with their friends.
- During more passive moments, when waiting for a game to load or when in a "less stressful" game mode, players are more likely to have general conversation about non-game topics, thereby reinforcing offline connections.
- Children perceive some of the most frequent harms of social play to come from interactions with their existing friends. Harmful interactions tend to centre around teasing or arguments within groups, rather than being singled out or bullied. Some children mentioned that their friends might say something to them while gaming which they would not say in real life.
- In the Fortnite group, children reported that friends (as well as strangers) tease each other over which in-game purchases they can afford. Because players need real money in order to buy V-Bucks, this creates a sense of who is 'rich' or not at school, and players without many additional items are made to feel excluded or different.
- Across the groups, children reported being aware of the dangers of talking to strangers online, with many saying they had strategies to avoid harm or to avoid talking to strangers altogether. When children do talk to unknown players, they say that most of these interactions are centred on the game itself rather than the disclosure of any personal information. There were, however, some examples of children being asked to share personal information in games. On Roblox, the children reported that being offered access to 'Roblox generators' by other players to improve their game, in return for personal information or passwords, was commonplace.
- Online games can give children the opportunity to learn and develop soft skills, specifically strategic thinking, teamwork and creativity. One child spoke of how she enjoys dressing up and competing with other players on a virtual runway in the game Fashion Famous on Roblox. As she receives top rankings for her fashion designs, she feels good about herself and this boosts her confidence. Other children cited the opportunities which they have to think creatively, for example in building houses.
- Across the groups, there were instances in which gaming negatively impacted children's moods. Many of the "worst moments" children mentioned having while playing were to do with being killed on a particular game or losing to one of their friends. Feelings of frustration were often reported as one of the reasons why games became unenjoyable.
- Similarly, feeling as though you have been unable to reach

a personal in-game objective - for instance, getting to another level, beating a high score, or being the last one standing while playing - not only makes the game unenjoyable but also made some children feel as though time has been wasted.

- Across the groups, children rarely reported feeling as if there was a trade-off between playing online games or spending their free time doing something else. They still play outside with their friends, go to football training or visit their grandparents at the weekend. However, some children find it hard to convince friends to go outside and play with them because most of their friends prefer to play online games indoors.
- A few children mentioned feeling that gaming is addictive and is the only thing they can do with their free time. In these instances, children reported feeling a loss of control over how they spend their free time. Some of the addictive qualities are exacerbated by the game itself, which requires players to spend a lot of time and/or money in the game in order not to be left behind. For instance, in FIFA, with the release of new players and the ability to upskill existing players using the daily squad-building challenges, there is a sense that those playing the game need to play consistently in order to have a good chance of winning.
- Almost all the children in the sample spend money on a range of in game purchases. The amount of money children spend on games varies. The amount of money children report spending on games has increased annually, with some spending over £300 in one year. Peer pressure and influence from famous gaming YouTubers, are factors that children say lead to them feeling pressured to spend money on in-game purchases.
- Game design also encourages spending. In games such as FIFA, children can either improve by investing significant time to build up their squad or spend money in the hope of quickly advancing their position. The latter option is the most popular across the sample.
- In some cases, this spending was done in order to receive a collection of unknown rewards, so-called loot boxes. The most obvious example of this is FIFA player packs, which some children acknowledged as being similar to gambling.

### Recommendations

- Gambling laws need updating to reflect the reality of children's experiences of spending money within games. Developers and platforms should not enable children to progress within a game by spending money. Spending should be limited to items which are not linked to performance - e.g. aesthetic items such as new outfits.
- The practice of purchasing loot boxes (consumable virtual items which can be redeemed to receive a randomised selection of further items) should be considered as gambling and should be restricted.
- Games companies and platforms should share aggregated anonymised data about players with independent researchers, including average length of time spent on particular games, to facilitate much needed research into the nature and effects of excessive use.
- Games that are distributed online should be subject to a legally enforceable age-rating system, just as physical games are. There should be a requirement for an additional warning to be displayed for games which facilitate in-game spending.
- Online games should be a key focus of digital citizenship lessons in schools, rather than lessons focusing exclusively on social media. Teachers involved in the delivery of these lessons should be familiar with how key online games that are popular with children work.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CCO-Gaming-the-System-2019.pdf>