

Laura Higgins - Roblox

Darshana Jayemanne - Abertay University

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Why Games Developers need to engage with parents to keep their communities healthy.

A dive into the current landscape & recommendations



Abstract

Research (such as the recent Roblox [study](#)¹) shows that parents are worried about their kids' gaming and that much of this fear is perpetuated by the media and social media. It is also evident that there is a huge divide between what parents and kids think is happening around online safety conversations and we could help to address this from an industry point of view.

While we acknowledge that some concerns are valid and we need to share advice around these (for example bullying or excessive playing) we also want to help game creators speak about the positives of gaming to parents so they can have a balanced conversation, rather than just focusing on the negative. We will highlight the need for education and explore what this might look like from a platform's perspective.

Introduction

Play is essential to children's development, education, and socialisation. Digital platforms are becoming increasingly important in children's play, with researchers finding significant effects at increasingly young ages². By the end of 2019, it is estimated that the global gaming industry was worth around \$152 billion, with over 2.5 billion players globally, around 21% of these are under 18 according to the 2019 [ESA Essential Facts report](#)³. The success of the digital games industry means that our work is increasingly central to the way that parents and children think about learning and safety. These are growing debates for the future of gaming and gamers, and given gaming's growing influence, for society at large. This White Paper calls for further discussion on how we can build Fair Play for children and young people on our platforms.

While this topic is hugely important, this discussion paper will serve as an initial introduction to be followed up in more depth. This discussion paper is an introduction and overview of the key issues for young gamers and their caregivers, as well as considerations and recommendations for developers. The scope of this topic is tremendous, in part due to the variety of issues facing children worldwide and the reality that many digital gaming platforms reach children. Governmental responses have been various, ranging from the [UK's Digital Charter](#)⁴ to China's [Minor Protection Law](#).⁵ In this paper, we will use Roblox as a case study to indicate some key issues, and outline important resources for thinking and communicating about gaming and children. While this paper will mostly be oriented to Anglophone contexts, it is hoped that the issues raised here will spur worldwide discussion commensurate with the

¹ "Survey Says Parents and Teens Don't Discuss Appropriate" 7 Nov. 2019, <https://blog.roblox.com/2019/11/survey-parents-teens-dont-discuss-appropriate-online-behavior/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

² "Gameworlds - Bloomsbury Publishing." <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/gameworlds-9781623568023/>. Accessed 18 May. 2020.

³ "Essential Facts - Entertainment Software Association." <https://www.theesa.com/essential-facts/>. Accessed 18 May. 2020.

⁴ "Digital Charter - GOV.UK." 25 Jan. 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-charter>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

⁵ "Children's Rights: China | Law Library of Congress." <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/child-rights/china.php>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

game industry's reach and influence: this broader discussion is critical because as the [Global Kids Online](#)⁶ project has identified, there are significant inequalities in children's access to connected devices worldwide. Furthermore, while Roblox is a good case study because the platform caters to children, the issues raised here are not unique to child-oriented games and should be of interest to developers across the industry.

Research such as the Roblox study shows that parents are worried about their kids' gaming and that much of this fear is perpetuated by the media and social media.

A great example of the harm that can be caused by the media are the hoax stories that have appeared, such as '[Momo](#)'⁷ (according to media outlets, an online challenge which put kids at risk of suicide, but in truth was a hoax featuring an image of a model designed by a special effects studio in Japan. The hoax stated that kids were contacted on social media by "Momo" and given a list of tasks to complete which became increasingly violent to themselves, the final challenge being to kill themselves). In the first few days of the story, online searches for 'Momo' increased by **45000%**, fuelled by kids searching for the content and parents trying to find out if it was true. Andy Phippen, Professor of Digital Rights at Bournemouth University who carried out the above [research](#)⁸ told us:

"What momo week shows us, from the data analysed as part of our research, is that ill-considered reactions and a lack of critical thinking around online incidents by adults, who have safeguarding responsibilities for you people, will drive them to the very content we are claiming to protect them from." (Phippen, 2019)

It is also evident that there is a huge divide between what parents and kids think is happening around online safety conversations and we could help to address this from an industry point of view. [Unicef](#)⁹ too have argued for a balanced approach that recognises the extremely significant opportunities that digital games provide children, while also acknowledging the risks that come with these new forms of communication and socialisation: "Children are a key consumer group for online gaming, which can offer opportunities to collaborate, learn and simply have fun".¹⁰

What are the risks for children in online games? Many concerns around children's gaming are valid and we need to share advice around these critical issues (child sexual exploitation, bullying, excessive playing, inappropriate commercial content). However, these concerns need to be contextualised properly if effective action is to be taken.

Research has demonstrated that online games can bring important positive social, educational, and psychological benefits to children and young people. It is important to tell these stories also. Phippen

⁶ "Global Kids Online." <http://globalkidsonline.net/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

⁷ "Momo Challenge hoax - Wikipedia." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Momo_Challenge_hoax. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

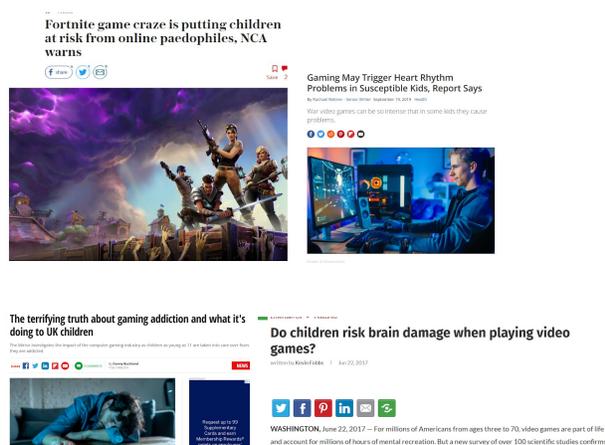
⁸ "Digital Ghost Stories; Impact, Risks and Reason - SWGfL." [Digital Ghost Stories; Impact, Risks and Reasons](#). Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

⁹ "Child Rights and Online Gaming - UNICEF Innocenti." https://www.unicef-irc.org/files/upload/documents/UNICEF_CRBDigitalWorldSeriesOnline_Gaming.pdf. Accessed 18 May. 2020.

¹⁰ "Child Rights and Online Gaming: Opportunities and Challenges for Children and the Industry" https://www.unicef-irc.org/files/upload/documents/UNICEF_CRBDigitalWorldSeriesOnline_Gaming.pdf. Accessed 05/05/2020.

and Brennan (2019)¹¹, for example, have warned against “excessive ‘solutions’” that make online spaces proxy for wider social problems. Similarly, institutions such as the American Psychological Association and World Health Organisation have made moves to pathologise digital games (such as identifying ‘gaming disorder’) but researchers have provided informed challenges to such classifications. Przybylski and Weinstein (2019)¹² for example, have argued that while gaming can indeed be ‘dysregulated’ (presenting challenges to individuals who may play too often in ways that impact other aspects of their lives), as with any communications technology, this possibility needs to be placed in the context of wider psychological and social needs and frustrations. Interestingly, only one year after recognizing gaming addiction as a mental health disorder, following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent “stay at home orders” issued globally, the World Health Organization has now recommended playing video games as an effective way to minimise the spread of the disease, supporting the global campaign #PlayApartTogether¹³. Many accidents happen in playgrounds, but the way to address this is not to ban playgrounds but to think more deeply about their design and the role they play in the wider society.

Parents, What Do We Know? The Roblox Case Study: Roblox recently carried out two surveys amongst UK and US audiences. 89% of UK parents told us they were fearful of their kids’ online gaming, citing contact from strangers, lack of human face to face interaction, and addiction amongst their fears. Half told us that they got those fears from media and social media, examples can be seen here, in the following articles:



There is also a significant gap in what parents think is happening and how teens perceive it, for example in our US study of parents and teens¹⁴ :

¹¹ "'Over-Blocking' Online Harms May Infringe Children's Rights" 30 Oct. 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andyrobertson/2019/10/30/over-blocking-online-harms-may-infringe-childrens-rights-digital-literacy-is-the-answer/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

¹² "How the presence of mobile communication technology" <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0265407512453827>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

¹³ "Games Industry Unites to Promote World Health Organization" 28 Mar. 2020, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200328005018/en/Games-Industry-Unites-Promote-World-Health-Organization>. Accessed 18 May. 2020.

¹⁴ This online poll was commissioned to SurveyMonkey as part of Roblox’s Digital Civility Initiative and conducted October 19-29, 2019, among 10,000 US adults, including 3,571 parents of



Another concerning finding is that while 91% of parents said they believed their kids would come to them if they were being bullied, only 26% of teens said the same. Most teens would report the issue to the platform, speak with the bully directly or find a different adult, such as a teacher or other relative. As developers, we need to empower parents to have the *right* conversations to ensure that they feel confident in supporting their kids with these issues, particularly around gaming, and likewise that kids and teens feel safe bringing up their concerns in the first place. We need to ask: What can the game industry learn from other sectors such as education, who are the key stakeholders in the games industry (such as community managers?), and who should lead the effort to educate families and players and work towards buy-in from decision-makers? Ultimately, the question that industry—from development studios to platform holders—needs to ask is *Where does the responsibility lie for working towards children’s safety in online games?* We believe this sits with industry first.



Capturing Roblox Data

The survey of 1,530 UK parents with children aged between 7 and 17 was commissioned by Roblox as part of its [digital civility initiative](#) and conducted by Vital Statistics September 25—October 3, 2019. The research conducted adheres to the UK Market Research Society code of conduct (2019) and processes comply with the DPA (1998).

children age 7-17 (922 of them are millennials), and 580 teens, 430 of whom play online games once a month or more.

The second survey, an online poll was commissioned to SurveyMonkey as part of Roblox's [Digital Civility Initiative](#) and conducted October 19-29, 2019 among 10,000 US adults, including 3571 parents of children age 7-17 (922 of them are millennials), and 580 teens, 430 of whom play online games once a month or more. Respondents for this survey were selected from the more than 2 million people who take surveys on the SurveyMonkey platform each day. The modeled error estimate for this survey is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points for results among parents and 5% percentage points for the results among teens. Data have been weighted initially for age, race, sex, education, and geography using the Census Bureau's American Community Survey to reflect the demographic composition of the United States age 13 and over, then weighted for age, race, sex, education, employment status, and geography using Census Bureau's Current Population Survey to reflect the demographic composition of United States employed population.

There has been much discussion about the "safety by design" model, effectively ensuring that when companies are planning a new project, they consider various safety aspects from the outset, rather than attempting to retrofit moderation or tools. That isn't to say you shouldn't be flexible and adaptable – tech improves all the time and it is good practice to make sure you are using the best you can on your platform, but you should have a few bare minimum standards before any member of the public uses your platform – especially so with a children-facing environment. Consideration needs to be given to policy, standards and legal issues. There are likely regional issues to consider too. Building effective policies takes time, and decision making should include multiple teams to ensure all aspects are covered. Player interactions also needs to be a priority area, Developers should consider how game design can impact policy and standards around acceptable conduct.

[UKCCIS](#)¹⁵ (now UKCIS) produced [this guide](#) which provides advice for start-ups providing social or interactive services around safeguarding under 18's on their platform.



There are other great examples of guidance for industry on safety by design good practice including - www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/safety-by-design¹⁶ and www.twohat.com/tag/safety-by-design¹⁷

This will be increasingly important with the growth of the 'Internet of things'¹⁸ (also known as 'IoT', connected devices throughout the home such as TV's, listening devices such as Siri or Alexa, heating systems or even fridges), where there is a huge responsibility on companies to manage data, safety, and

¹⁵ "UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) - GOV.UK."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-council-for-child-internet-safety-ukccis>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

¹⁶ "Safety by Design | eSafety Commissioner." <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/safety-by-design>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

¹⁷ "safety by design Archives - Two Hat." 18 Oct. 2019, <https://www.twohat.com/tag/safety-by-design/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

¹⁸ "Internet of things - Wikipedia." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_of_things. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

privacy effectively. We have already seen some well-reported errors such as the connected “[My friend Cayla](#)” doll¹⁹, a Bluetooth enabled listening/talking toy. There followed much controversy as the doll was allegedly recording everything their young owners were saying, without permission. This later led to the doll being banned in Germany, then pulled from sale in multiple countries and threats of fines were issued to vendors who continued to sell her.

How do we reach parents?

There are many different methods of reaching parents, not least direct advertising, media coverage, creating resources for schools, working with online safety organisations, sponsoring charities with a large parent following, however, all have inherent risks.

Advertising: Messages via advertising campaigns can be perceived as fake, often linked to merchandise rather than safety messages. More commercial games may also be seen as cynical. Often the type of advertising that reaches a given audience is difficult to target well as it may rely on metadata entered by third parties, or an algorithm poorly understood by a game developer or publisher. Children often lack the maturity to critically assess media, and as their main source of information outside of teachers and schools, it is a powerful source in shaping their perceptions. Examples of this include so-called “Influencers”, who post sponsored content on social channels. In 2019, the UK Advertising Standards Association took action against some brands and influencers and issued this new code of guidance which made it clearer that the posts featured paid ads. Many of these influencers are themselves poor at fact-checking or understanding the basis of their own influences, making it impossible to tease out bias. This impounds the challenges facing children and young people trying to make sound, evidence-based judgements.

Media engagement: Media often veers towards negative stories, and for many parents, the media is their main source of information. Historically, “news” was seen as balanced and well investigated. More recently stories have been published without the full background, and often just outlining the harm rather than using an opportunity to educate parents on how to avoid these situations occurring. There has been an increase in so-called “fake news”, which has led to a lack of confidence in the accuracy of reporting, but also topics being presented as “news” as a way to convey authority that is not deserved. Be open to journalists, and be prepared to take responsibility if something does go wrong but also share the positives of what you’re doing around safety.

Specific ideas for engaging the media:

- Write a regular company blog or positive articles on Medium, LinkedIn, Quora, and more; it is essential that we provide balance and factual advice and information about positive initials, rather than the focus always being towards the negative.
- Consider asking for guest content or writers external to your company to add some balance and impartiality;
- Push out regular ‘good news’ stories, such as new appointments, safety features, or positive events on your platform such as concerts, or fundraisers. Consider partnerships with NGOs and charity partners. Developer and Community stories also work as a positive news story. You may

¹⁹ "My Friend Cayla - Wikipedia." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Friend_Cayla. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

also consider framing the company-wide investments you are making in player safety, and wellbeing.

Working with schools—historically, some schools have been relatively anti-tech or have had a negative view of gaming. Anecdotally, online safety sessions offered by schools appear to have notoriously low pick up with parents, and often the companies offering these sessions are not experts in the field. Furthermore, the quality of advice can be very patchy, or at worse, scare-mongering. That said, some companies (including Roblox) have had success working with coding camps, or specific programmes. Two great examples from the UK include:

- [Digital Schoolhouse](#)²⁰—a partnership between the trade body [UKIE](#)²¹, along with Nintendo and the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport which uses play-based learning to engage kids into stem subjects.
- The work being done between Abertay University and the National Crime Agency, NSPCC, and Space Ape Games, which aims to teach honours students on Game Design and Development courses, to consider child safety by design.

Online Safety Partners: Online safety partners are probably the safest option for reaching parents. These relationships do not need to have a formal basis, but a two-way sharing of information about how your platform works, what safety tools you have built-in, etc, which these organisations can then amplify to a broad range of stakeholders (in particular, parents, educators, policymakers) on your behalf. Provided you can stand up to scrutiny, building positive, transparent partnerships with recognized safety partners can help amplify your messages. It provides credibility and demonstrates a commitment to safety practices. Options here could include creating printed resources, attending events to talk on safety, or upskilling practitioners to provide advice for parents, for example, online safety helplines. This will likely incur costs – many offer support or membership packages, however, smaller companies may prefer a project-based model. Examples of membership organisations include the [Internet Watch Foundation](#)²² and [Family Online Safety Institute](#)²³, whereas if you were working with a localized safety organisation you might want to fund and create a one-off resource in Spanish, for example, rather than engaging in an annual membership.

Charity Partners: Possibly the most expensive option, often becoming a supporter of a charity is a long-term commitment, many seek 24-month partnerships. Be prepared for a worst-case scenario – should there be a safety incident involving your platform the charity will likely cease all work with you and possibly publish a critical statement. They will want to be distanced from you immediately and protect their reputation, potentially further damaging yours. That said, there are some great examples of charities working with industry – Facebook partnered with the [Diana Awards](#)²⁴ and [Childnet International](#)²⁵ to provide digital safety Ambassadors to all UK Secondary schools.

Government and Law Enforcement: The recent increase in governmental scrutiny of the games industry is often accompanied by questions about youth welfare and play. While government and law

²⁰ "Digital Schoolhouse." <https://www.digitalschoolhouse.org.uk/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

²¹ "Welcome to Ukie | Ukie." <https://ukie.org.uk/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

²² "Internet Watch Foundation." <https://www.iwf.org.uk/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

²³ "Family Online Safety Institute." <https://www.fosi.org/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

²⁴ "The Diana Award." <https://diana-award.org.uk/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

²⁵ "Childnet - Childnet." <https://www.childnet.com/>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

enforcement obviously has a key role in children's safeguarding, there can be difficulties in explaining the specifics of game design, development, and ownership to policymakers, administrators, and police. However as policies develop around children's online play, there is great value in being part of the consultation and discussion processes that often accompany policy work. Liaising with representative bodies (such as Ukie in the United Kingdom) can be helpful for smaller developers and publishers in these interactions.

Academia: Scholarship on digital games informs other sectors such as government and NGOs, who often require academic evidence for guiding policy. While early controversies arose through scholarship on violent content, an equally robust tradition of work in academia takes a more productive approach to online games. As with journalism, working with academics can raise issues of non-disclosure and proprietary information, and these issues need to be carefully managed by both parties. However scholarship can tell longer-term stories about children's experiences online, and universities can influence groups such as governments that are difficult to reach through other means.

Social Media Platforms: Social media platforms can provide inexpensive (or even free) channels for communication with parents. Busy parents tend to want quick updates so reaching them while they scroll through social channels is a win-win. Ensuring quality content for your channels is essential, it is obvious when little effort is made, you need content that is representative of your brand, with genuinely engaging and helpful information, too "dry" and you'll lose your audience, too light-hearted and your message will be lost. Some specific actions could include

- A dedicated channel for families
- Sharing regular safety or privacy updates via your corp channels
- Quick tips via Twitter is a good way to get those regular messages out and can provide two way communication.
- Consider platforms like Quora for longer responses.

How can we educate players and families? We also need to ensure that we provide education in-game and on the platform. This can be targeted at the players directly (using interstitial messages, advice at sign up or incentivising positive behaviour with rewards for example), or by building in specific pages for parents (see corp.roblox.com/parents or <https://corporate.moviestarplanet.com/parents> for great examples.)

There are many barriers to communicating with parents: some parents don't see it as their role, it's not of interest, or they just don't understand. Offering bite-sized advice, that is easy to follow, and resonates with parents is key—what do they *really* need to know? It is important to speak with your community, to genuinely listen and shape your advice to help with the issues they raise. You should regularly review your own moderation, what trends are you seeing that could be prevented by some education work? Can you see opportunities to build in education, wellbeing advice, and education in-game too? Ensure you are providing the tools and support parents need to have better control over their children's experience. This needs to be a collaborative effort, with industry-leading the way. Make it clear to players and families why their wellbeing is vital to building healthy communities, explain the tools you have in place, and encourage them to use them, as well as prioritising their own healthy behaviours.

In conclusion, as with any communications system, gaming can present risks to children. No one actor can solve these issues individually, and a broad spectrum approach is important to develop. There is only so much we can really cover in this brief whitepaper, deeper consideration should be given to the Internet of Things (IoT) which includes connected devices in the home, some of which control your heating, lights, doorbell, even your fridge, and the broader legal and regulatory responsibilities we will see emerging over the next 12 months. We have to focus our efforts on protecting our *entire* community. Our duty of care doesn't stop with kids, we need to build safe, healthy spaces for everyone who uses our platforms. The difficulty of definitively assigning responsibility for children's safeguarding in digital games shows that a broad-spectrum approach is needed and clarifies the stakes that the games industry has in proactive engagement with the issues that will shape the next generations of gaming.