Games, Geeks and the Parent's Dilemma - Audio

Discussion

<u>Key:</u>

AS: **Angela Saini**
C: Caroline
MG: Mark Griffiths
VC: Victoria Cooper
Ba: Barney
H: Hamish
KS: Kieron Sheehy
PS: Phil Stuart

AS: **Hello, and welcome to the sixth and final track in this podcast, Games, Geeks, and the Parents' Dilemma. I am Angela Saini and over the last five tracks we have been hearing first hand experiences of gaming from a variety of viewpoints. We have heard from teachers, parents, children, a games designer and an e-safety specialist.**

Round the table now to discuss some of the issues raised in the previous tracks, I'm joined by Dr Victoria Cooper and Dr Kieron Sheehy who we have heard from previously. They are both from the Open University Centre for Childhood Development and Learning. I am also joined by Mark Griffiths, Professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University. He is a chartered psychologist, director of the International Gaming Research Unit and an expert on gaming and online activity. And we also have Barney, the 19-year-old gamer we have already heard talk so eloquently about his experiences of gaming.

Now, this programme is going to be divided into five sections. We are covering addiction, violence, identity, creativity and the benefits of gaming. So, first of all, kicking off with addiction, the idea that games can be addictive, here is one mother, Caroline, who we heard previously, talking about the difficulty of getting her young son to stop playing games.

C: With boys it's really, really difficult to get them to stop. When they do stop, they are quite aggressive and, actually, we have awful temper tantrums. And I find that actually what it does to me is it makes me feel incredibly negative towards the whole area of computer games because, actually, it just becomes a family crisis, so I think they are really addictive. And if you have got a slightly addictive personality, you just can't stop, and the way they are designed is that there's really never a finite stopping point.

AS: **Well, Mark Griffiths, you are a psychologist, is that typical behaviour?**

MG: Yeah, I have got three 'screenagers' myself so I can totally appreciate how difficult it is sometimes to get the kids off playing video games but that in and of itself does not mean that somebody is addictive whatsoever. If you can imagine something you are doing that you really enjoy and then somebody comes in and says, "Right, stop now," you would probably go through those things of not wanting to stop because it's something you're really enjoying, and with my kids, what we do is give them time warnings - they get warnings saying there's 30 minutes left, 15 minutes left, 5 minutes left, 1 minute left. That completely cut out all the temper tantrums that we had in our family. Obviously, that particular mother was saying, well, this is because the game is addictive. Well, she is right in the sense that games are designed to keep you playing again and again and again. I mean, no games designer wants somebody to pick up their game and for you to put it down thirty minutes later. And there is a massive difference between what I would call excessive gaming and addictive gaming because, really, addiction is all about how it impacts on the rest of your life.

AS: I mean, you are saying that excessive gaming doesn't always mean that somebody is addicted to playing video games. What do the rest of you think? Victoria?

VC   I am thinking back to the tracks. We listened to Miranda and Barney who both describe the compulsive nature of gaming, which I thought was really interesting. But I do wonder whether… When we are talking about gaming, we come with some preconceptions and there is quite a lot of negative connotations attached to gaming and I do wonder whether gaming is indeed different to any other aspect of play, where children find it hard to stop play and come out. And I can think of countless examples of card games, Warhammer, where I've certainly observed children be equally as compulsive. So I do wonder whether, when we are talking about gaming and particularly addiction, whether we have to strip down what those negative connotations are.

AS: So Kieron, what about you?

KS: Well, I just agree with both of the previous sets of comments. I think there's a need to make a distinction between an addiction and excessive play.

AS: But it does seem if somebody is playing a game for twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours a day, sometimes even more, to an outsider, that will seem like an addiction. And we have heard stories of kids who play so much that their exam results suffer.

Barney, so you are a young gamer, have you ever played so much that you think it has negatively affected your school work?

Ba: I think it did affect my A Levels. I got to a stage where… I didn't consider myself addicted, but I did know I was playing a lot and I would have chosen to play games over revising or doing homework and left that till the very, very last minute. If I hadn't have been playing the games, I don't think I would have been doing the homework either; I would have found something else to do instead. It is just another way of procrastinating.

MG: I think there's another issue here, okay. There's a real difference between what I would call problematic gaming. There's an example you have got

where somebody probably should have been doing their school work and is playing a video game. Again, that, in and of itself, is not an addiction. For me, to be a genuine addiction, the activity has to be the single, most important thing in that person's life. They do it to neglect of everything else. It compromises everything in their life, including their schoolwork, their university work, their job (depending on what age they are). It compromises their personal relationships. They use it as a way of modifying their mood, either to get buzzed up, high, aroused, excited or, in fact, the exact opposite; to tranquilise, to relax, to escape, to numb, to distress, and the very simple thing is that healthy enthusiasms add to life and addictions take away from it.

AS: **So Barney, having heard that explanation, would you say you were addicted to games at that point in life?**

Ba: No. I could have put them down. But going back to the original point of being interrupted and your parents coming and telling you to stop, my mum would frequently come in and say, "Put that on pause." And you'd say, "I can't because I am playing with twelve other people round the world and they aren't just all going to pause for you as well." But that's one thing, it makes you look like you can't pause it, you know, psychologically you can't pause it.

AS: **But there's a social element there to it, then, isn't there?**

Ba: Yeah, it is. If you are in a middle of a game, I'd say, you know, "Just give me two or three more minutes, literally, and then I'll turn it off."

AS: **Okay. Right, so one other issue that we want to cover is this difference between boys and girls. So the same mother we heard from earlier was saying that boys and girls react or handle the excitement around games differently. Is there a physiological or psychological difference there, Mark?**

MG: In terms of have you ever played, there isn't a real difference between boys and girls. In terms of frequency of play, all of the research shows that boys play far more than girls in terms of the amount of time they spend gaming. If you look at what are the reasons for that, well, firstly, most games are designed by males for other males. I think video games, just like a lot of sport, is perceived to be a very male activity and what you tend to find is that the average female has much better verbal ability skills than males but males have a lot better spatial ability skills.

If we just take a very simple one like Tetris which is obviously about spatial awareness and spatial orientation. If males on average score more highly than females, that in itself will be rewarding to make males play again and again and again. The standard female answer, I'm talking here about girls who are, kind of 11, 12, 13, when you ask them, "Why aren't you playing as much as, for instance, your brother or your friends?" They will say, "I've got better things to do with my life."

AS: **[Laughter].There is also this controversial theory that neuroscientist Susan Greenfield has come up with, that the process or the act of playing games is actively changing the brains of young people. What do you think about this?**

MG: Well, there's actually no empirical evidence for that. Susan Greenfield has never, as far as I am aware, published a single paper in terms of video game playing. I have seen Susan speak on this particular topic but, personally, I feel there's no empirical evidence out there to say that's the case.

AS: Kieron, what do you think, sorry?

KS: No I was just nodding. There's no evidence to support those claims. They are nice and dramatic but there's no evidence to support them.

AS: I mean, there are a lot of scientists who have said that the research just isn't there.

KS: Yes, everyone says the research isn't there.

AS: Okay, so let's go onto the next topic, which is violence. This is something that concerns parents quite dramatically. Here is Hamish, a young boy, 15 years old.

H: Some of these games are, like, really violent. A lot of my friends who do play on games quite a lot, they are usually violent games and that, sort of, drags them into watching violent films and doing karate or some sort of martial arts that they can get their kicks from.

AS: Barney, is this something that resonates with you at all, this link between violence and gaming?

Ba: Yeah, I'm certainly aware of it. I think the concerns are that people playing a game are then going to go out and start killing people or start actively being violent. But I think if a game encourages you to take up a hobby like martial arts, I think that's a good thing; I don't think that's a bad thing whatsoever.

AS: These games are sometimes very violent and quite graphic.

Ba: Yes.

AS: Does that affect you at all?

Ba: It didn't affect me because it's a game and anybody should be able to differentiate between a game and real life.

VC: And people underestimate, I think, hugely, children - that they can't differentiate between fantasy and reality and there's a huge… there's a wealth of research which demonstrates children are far more competent and do understand.

AS: So that separation is there. Kieron, what do you want to add?

KS: Two points there. One is the fact that we were talking about games and immediately we go to the idea of, you know, aggression and violence. And if you look at the top selling games of all time, there's only one game in the top ten, Grand Theft Auto, that could be seen as violent. The rest are all social games. So the idea that all games are bad is they are very much misleading.

AS: But the games that are violent.

KS: The games that are violent then the research is, kind of, mixed. It's a complex area. In 2009, there was quite a good study that looked at the quality of research that had been done and came to the conclusion there was no effect – that children who played violent games were not more likely to be violent. However, that was followed up by another very good study, looked at about 130,000 young people playing and that came to the conclusion that there was an effect but it was rather small and so you could best think of it as a risk factor and certainly not anywhere near the same scale as a person's social background, the social group they hang around with, their relationship with their parents.

AS: **But, intuitively, we do assume that constantly interacting with these violent images must have some affect on young children who sometimes we assume or we intuit can't separate between fantasy and real life.**

KS: Well, my generation was brought up on Tom and Jerry and I don't see many people my age in their 50s running round with axes, perhaps slicing people up or joining places where they can let rip these terrible violent things that were imprinted on them when they were young.

AS: **Well, Mark, you have done lots of research into violence and video games. What's your perspective on this?**

MG: In America, there are two particular camps in the area of video game violence. You get a guy called Ferguson saying that there's basically no effect of violence at all and on the other side you have got Craig Anderson, who consistently says that violent video games have an effect. Obviously, when we talk about children, remember most of these studies are done on late teenagers/early adults and in fact most ethics committees now won't let, for instance, a five-year-old play a violent video game and then see to what extent their behaviour changes afterwards, so we haven't got that kind of data. For me, the real critical question is that I think a lot of people that, if you like, gravitate towards playing violent video games have that previous position to start with.

        I mean, there's a number of studies showing that people that play very violent video games are more likely to be delinquent or more likely to end up in young offenders' institutions. So, for me, it's not about blaming the game; there is something inherent within that individual, which means they seek out those particular types of experience when they are playing game. Until we have a big, longitudinal survey that actually take all the kind of aggression and violence factors into account, including the amount of violent TV they've watched, violent films they've watched, the amount of aggression they might see in the playground or whatever, is we are never going to have a definitive study to actually answer this question. However, there's a difference between what I know empirically as a scientist. You asked me, "Mark, do I let my three children play violent video games?" "No I don't."

AS: **So, Victoria, what do you think about this?**

VC: I mean, certainly, as a parent I would look at gaming differently than I would as a researcher. I mean, it was interesting to listen to James, one of the parents in the tracks who talked about how he observed his two children's

aggressive behaviour spilling over into their free play. It made me think about how you view play and even the word gaming is associated with play. But I got the distinct impression, certainly working with the children and listening to the tracks, that many parents, educators, researchers, don't view gaming as play and they certainly don't view it in the same way as they would other types of play. And it seemed to be, again, a negative view. It's okay to spend all day out playing football or playing in the countryside, playing with your friends but it's not okay to game and where does that distinction come from? Why is that viewed as bad play and one be viewed as good?

AS: **Yeah, I think parents do think about this very differently from the way researchers do naturally because they've got to think about their kids. Kieron, for you, if the research isn't there, if the metholodologies aren't clear, if we don't actually know the outcome, can we make any assumptions on this or do parents just have to go on their gut feeling?**

KS: I think Marcus said about the need for a longitudinal study and I think that's really crucial; good longitudinal evidence isn't there.

AS: **What is a longitudinal study?**

KS: Well, you follow children through their life course. So the children most at risk of developing the sort of classic syndromes that people identify are perhaps children who have a predisposition, as Mark was saying, towards this type of thing, families where their interaction with games aren't controlled. The games are pretty explicit about age levels and things like that.

VC: Well, we know, don't we? We know that young children are playing games which aren't age appropriate.

KS: Yes. But I wouldn't blame the children for that.

VC: No, no of course not.

AS: **Barney, have you ever played a game that wasn't right for your age?**

Ba: Most of my childhood I did, and the thing is my mum was quite happy to go out and buy the game for me because she knew deep down it wasn't going to have any negative or adverse effects on me as a person.

KS: It's mediated to the family that you are in. The child isn't sat there on their own.

MG: But I do think that's an interesting issue. There is what I call a technological generation gap, is that if parents don't understand it, they, kind of, minimise the harm. Because I can't think of many parents, including my own, that would happily have given me an 18 video or an 18 film to watch, yet they'll be quite happy to have an 18 game.

AS: **Yes. And the media, I guess, have a big part to play in this. One example I guess, that parents now have in their heads is that of the Norwegian killer, Anders Breivik, who said that he was inspired and trained by Call of Duty, Modern Warfare.**

KS: I mean, there are millions upon millions of people playing computer games every day and there's how many of these terrible instances occurring? So I think that alone says something.

AS: Extreme cases, yeah.

KS: On the other hand, if you want to learn how to… you know, the names of weapons, how to plan, plot and strategy, computer games have a training element. A lot of the armed forces use computer games to train on strategy in how to use things. So they can be used for different purposes but, I mean, in terms of this idea of do people who play on Modern Warfare, are they going to do similar things? No, they are not.

AS: But Barney, you, in one of the tracks you talk about how you become so engrossed in a game and you really enjoyed it because it allowed you to play out something in fantasy that you knew you could never do in reality.

Ba: Yeah, yeah, like going to war. Most people wouldn't want to go to war but I think they would be intrigued to know what it would be like.

AS: And on that point, we should go to the next topic of conversation which is identity, games, what impact do they have on the formation of identity of young people? Here is Miranda with her experience of playing life simulation game, the Sims.

M: I, kind of, felt that I was in the computer game, so I was, kind of, connecting with the Sims in a way because I was controlling them and I was controlling their lifestyles, what they were going to do. I, kind of, was really happy with this idea of thinking, oh, well, I'd like to be like that when I'm older and I would make a Sim of myself and I would do what I'd like to be when I'm older - I'd like to be an actress so I made them into an actress and it was really fun.

AS: Victoria, children's experiences and the formation of their identity is at the heart of your work. So do you think video games can feed into children's identity?

VC: Certainly, yes, certainly, most definitely, and I think when you listen to the extract you just have and I mentioned before, Barney, it's clearly something that… it's part of their everyday life now. And as researchers, we are now interested in exploring how children game, what they are interested in, how they like playing. I mean, I do wonder whether we are seeing a shift in how children are playing, I don't know. I'm, sort of, a bit divided on that really.

AS: Barney, what do you think? I mean, you've already said that playing games has allowed you to put yourself in the shoes of somebody who has a different life from yours.

Ba: Hmm.

AS: Have there been other games that have influenced your identity any other way?

Ba: I don't think so. I don't think I've ever let anything influence any decisions I make. I think the type of games you play are very, very important for your

social life, though. All of my friends would have played Call of Duty and none of them are particularly violent. Some of them happen to be interested in guns and that sort of thing. None of them have gone into the army.

AS: **Victoria.**

VC: I think, Barney, you mentioned as well that you were able to make friends and socially interact.

Ba: Yes. You can obviously speak over the game with a microphone and a headset.

VC: When I first came to working with children and exploring their everyday experience using gaming, I came with my own parental expectations, thinking that in some way gaming was antisocial, sedentary, something they do on their own. And, certainly, for some children it seems that their perception was that they didn't like it because it wasn't sociable, whereas it's opened my eyes a little bit talking to someone like Barney who has found it very sociable.

AS: **Barney, this thing that you were saying about all your friends playing Call of Duty, how much has that social element, being part of the group fit into how you game?**

Ba: You didn't play it because your friends were playing it. Everybody bought it because they wanted it and you hear about it. You don't go and see a film because your friends are forcing you to see it. You go and see Harry Potter because you've read the book and you want to see it.

AS: **Kieron, what about you?**

KS: The sociable side is a big part of it. So many children play but not just Call of Duty but Halo: Reach or FIFA or anything like that. They often play with people they know at school as well as expanding it beyond that and they are very sociable experiences and I would perhaps think that you do have a sense of identity about the types of games you play.

VC: Amanda mentions that, though that's quite different to what you were first saying because she was suggesting, certainly in her experience, that children do pigeonhole you based on the games you play and you can be bullied through certain games or it creates this whole identity of a gamer. And it seems to be that for some children, it's okay to game, to dip in and out but that's quite different to be a gamer, which has a different set of stereotypes and assumptions.

MG: But there's actually a bigger issue that runs right through all the topics that we are discussing and that is which games are you talking about, because there are so many different types of games. And when we are talking about identity, we are talking about addiction, or we are talking about violence, we are talking about very specific games or particular genres and so the gaming debate about whether you are a gamer, I would say… I wouldn't call myself a gamer, yet I do play video games.

AS: **Yes. So on this issue of gaming being a passive thing or a creative thing, parents have voiced concerns about the way playing video games**

isn't as creative or imaginative an activity as, say, reading a book which you can also get lost in. Here's parent of three, Caroline.

C: I think that they are using their own imagination and creating their own world with a book. With a computer game, the world is created for them. They are making choices within that world but it's a different kind of imagination.

AS: Kieron, so can a video game be as creative as reading or writing?

KS: Hmm, I would, first of all, say, I'm very hard pressed to say what is creative about sitting and looking at print on a page as opposed to creating an entire world with groups of people in a spangly, wonderful universe? People at work, they come home, they think, yes, I want to do something creative, what I'm going to do is I'm going to sit here and read a book.

VC: You do get lost in a book though.

KS: You can get lost. Yes, what's creative about that?

MS: But you get lost in a game and I have to say my kids spend hours creating avatars. My kids have got four or five avatars that they have created for me.

KS: [Laughter].

MS: I mean, I am very easy because I've got a beard and I wear glasses. Almost any avatar they can create, it looks like me. Whatever world they do, even whether it's creating a me on the Wii system or in a game, there is so much creativity that goes on. I mean, people always say that when you read a book you visualise what they might look like, well, in games, children can sit there for hours making all these characters, making their world.

AS: Do you worry, though, Mark, that some of the children and some of the parents suggested that in some ways, doing things in fantasy world, in virtual world, isn't as effective as doing it in the real world, and almost intimating that you are a bit sad if you can't play out those social skills in the real world, you can only play them out in…?

MG: Well, I'm sure there's some people that would be at that edge of not developing their social skills. I have to be honest, all my three kids, they are highly sporting, they've got lots of friends and the thing they don't do that I did when I was their age, they don't basically watch TV.

AS: So, Barney, is it true that you are not watching TV as much as you are playing games?

Ba: How creative is watching television? I don't think it is at all, because everything is there for you, you cannot dictate what happens. In a game, you can make so many decisions that influence the game and you are in control of it.

AS: Victoria, you seem more on the fence about this. You seem to think that activities in the real world, building a fort out of chairs and linen might be more creative and imaginative.

VC: I certainly did before I worked with children and young people. Talking about gaming, as I said, I came with this idea that in some way it was a timewasting activity and it infuriates me when I see my children sitting in front of a screen of any sort, a TV, a computer, games console, whatever it is, it infuriates me and I don't know why. It probably says more about me than them.

AS: Do you know, I think it's time that we hear more about the positive aspects of gaming, so let's go onto that section. Here is Phil Stuart of games studio, Preloaded.

PS: Playing games are just really an instinctive learning tool and on small children we are testing out social dynamics for the games itself and understanding order and systems through game rules and actually building relationships through co-operation and, sort of, team work. So we believe that the best games are something they are about and the about in our games is the history, the science, the embedded content. Playing a game about the Opium Wars or 1066 or about Trafalgar or genetics, is actually intrinsically interesting because the content itself is interesting.

AS: Kieron, you do lots of work around the inclusive aspects of gaming, so for you, gaming can be a positive thing in this respect.

KS: I suppose I am looking at children who typically wouldn't be able to engage with lots of social places so readily, so it might be children with physical impairments or socially isolated for one reason or another. When we did work in virtual worlds and virtual games, we found they used them a lot and they got a lot out of it. For children who have got restricted physical mobility, the games offer them a chance to do things they could never do in real life and to play something that's genuinely exciting, rather than to have to sit, as they said, and watch television. Television is dull. There are lots of studies that show benefits. You'd expect hand/eye coordination, planning, strategy, all those sort of things.

AS: One of the projects you are working on in the Open University is Second Life. Can you talk more about that?

KS: Yes, well, we are not working currently on that but it was looking at alternative ways of learning and interacting. So we worked on Second Life with an island that was for teenagers to come and build and learn and do things. They developed projects and worked together. Some reflected their academic interests but they didn't have to do that. We had some projects that won national awards that spun off that. Other people reported that they could be themselves more in the virtual game world than they could at school, where they were either bullied for being bright or bullied for looking different or things like that. So it was seen as a safe place for them to be.

AS: What other kind of people do you work with?

KS: Take a world like World of Warcraft, for example. It provides a really good place for people with disability to engage socially and in activities they find meaningful and socially valid and that's partly because computer games are more accessible, so the different input devices – you don't have to use a joystick or a keyboard, we can have adaptations to get all of that. You don't even need to use your hands. For example, we are doing some work on biofeedback where young people can control their performance within very

simple games through biofeedback, through skin responses and things like that. So you have the situation, for example, in Second Life, where someone who is completely unable to walk or move in the real world can fly and move about and do things they couldn't do physically in the real world. So it's very accessible and gives access to these exciting interactions to groups who have previously been denied them, who couldn't engage with the sort of traditional games that everyone seems to harp back to.

The other group I am thinking of are young people with severe learning difficulties. I talked to some young adults, sort of, 16, 17 year olds, and we talked about their use of computer games and virtual worlds and online stuff and they also really enjoyed it and we ran some sessions where they went into Second Life. Because it's so accessible, they had no problems engaging in Second Life, building creating and talking to their friends. When I asked them what they thought about it, they said, "Well, we live in a very rural area, this would be a way we could engage with our friends," and they gave some very good reasons why they should have that access to these computer games and video worlds. The key workers, the people who they work with, they all said no because what people wanted was real world experience, a fresh air experience. They felt it was something that this group should be denied.

And one more thing, I worked with some younger children – children from a mainstream school and children from a special school. We asked them about the computer games they played. They all played computer games, but when we talked to them about the purposes of it, it was interesting that the children from the mainstream school, for them, they all said, "We are learning skills that will be useful to us in the real world." Whereas the children with severe learning difficulties felt that the big plus to it was being allowed to do things that you couldn't do in the real world, quite sad, allowing them to have a peep at things that they wouldn't be allowed to do normally.

VC: Because one of the things I am interested in in my own research is using technology, for example, gaming, to reach hard to reach children and it's those children that you want to engage with socially. Using conventional methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, it's quite difficult and I think gaming allows you to bridge that divide.

And one of the things we did, and you listened to it, one of the tracks with Aidan and Barty and myself, were actually playing a game together. As a researcher, it allows you to do a number of things – you can explore children's everyday experience of gaming in their play but you can also forge a rapport, build up on the things that they are interested in and work from there.

AS: Mark, as a psychologist, what's your perspective?

MG: On the benefits of gaming? I'm actually for it. I mean one of the things that we know that's been shown in study after study, for instance, because of the engrossing nature of video games, people's threshold to pain is a lot higher. So, for instance, if you give children games to play after they've had chemotherapy, they need significantly less painkillers than those children who don't play anything after it.

AS: Why is that?

MG: Because it's what we call cognitive distraction. If you are playing in a sports game and you get a slight injury on the pitch, you can carry on and play and then when you come off the pitch you suddenly are in absolute pain. The pain was always there but you are so cognitively distracted by playing a sports game that you forget about the pain. Now, that happens with video games all the time but here we are using that engrossingly addictive nature and actually putting it to a medical and therapeutic effect.

AS: So on this theme of parental discomfort when it comes to video games, tussles over screen time are one of the things that had come up quite often. Here's parent of two boys, Vicky.

V: It's important that they are able to treat it with the respect that it needs, you know, have fun with it but there are other things to do in life. And it's important that they are out playing sport and running round the park with their friends as well. As long as they have a restricted time on it, I don't really see the harm in it.

AS: Victoria, do you think it would be useful for parents to have some kind of guidelines on the amount of time their kids should spend playing games?

VC: Most definitely, not just the amount of time – it's not just what you are playing, how long you are playing but perhaps when you are playing. Are you playing late into the evening and if children are finding it difficult to switch off and then go and, you know, come away from the activity and then go to bed, for instance, then parents need to think about that. Are they playing in their bedrooms, are they playing with other people? And actually listening to the tracks, the children all seemed very… they had lots of knowledge and understanding about the positives and the negatives of gaming and seemed very well informed.

AS: Kieron, what's your view on this?

KS: Well, just on the time, you wouldn't let a child stay up until 3 or 4 in the morning reading a book, would you, a young child? So the same sort of general parenting things and I have never… I've got four children, all very keen computer gamers, I've never had a problem.

AS: Do you have guidelines for them?

KS: No. It's not about time, as such. It's about what they are playing. I am more concerned about what they are playing than how long they are playing for. But I also understand you can't just switch off a game.

AS: So, Barney, have you ever had guidelines from your parents about how much time you spend gaming?

Ba: No. I was never given strict guidelines about what I could and couldn't do. You know, sometimes my mum would have to draw the line and just say, you know, it's 11 o'clock.

AS: **I mean, given that you said earlier that when you were doing your exams you do think you suffered from playing games too much, would you have appreciated more input from your parents at that point?**

B: Erm, I did get plenty of input but I chose to ignore it at the time.

AS: **So, Mark, it does seem as though even if you do have guidelines from parents that doesn't mean you can necessarily enforce those guidelines?**

MG: Yeah. I mean, I think parental responsibility is very important and I was on the Department of Health's working group for obesity, screen time and sedentary behaviour. We spent ages talking about whether we should actually recommend to parents how much screen time children should be engaged in. Because certainly in Australia and Canada and elsewhere, they've started to do that but I think that's certainly over prescriptive. In fact, the conclusion we came out in our report was, basically, sit less and move more. For me, the issue is how that screen time impacts on the rest of your life and for some children, even playing a small amount might impact in terms of their social skill development or their education or something else and for other children they could probably play a lot more. The parents know children best.

AS: **In those other countries you mentioned, like Australia, what were the guidelines and what was the rationale behind them?**

MG: Well, they were basically saying for children under three there should be no screen time whatsoever and that for children aged between about 4 and 13, it should be no more than two hours in front of any screen and we are talking about iPods, handheld games, computers. But, you know, the thing about that is that, you know, nowadays in most school environments, a lot of time is spent in screen education. Again, it's not even about the amount of time. Maybe we have to separate out educational from non-educational use.

AS: **So, finally, we are a coming to the end of this debate, this programme, of course, has geek in the title so we should really explore what does it mean to be a geek, not just in the gaming context but more generally. This is what Miranda and Martha, two girls, thought.**

Ma: Everybody knows what a geek is. They are just like someone who is quite nerdy, like glasses and like, "Oh, I just killed your dragon," just like that really. Do you know what I mean?

Mi: Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. There's this new game called Minecraft. I know a few people that some people are horrible to them because they play on this game because they think it's geeky, as Martha said, but I played on it and it's actually really fun.

AS: **I mean, for me, as someone who self-defines as a girl geek, I don't quite like that definition but what do you all think, Kieron, starting with you?**

KS: I thought you might ask that so I put it out on Twitter to see what people would say and what I got back it's a term that's changed over time. So, initially, it referred to people almost like circus freaks, then it became somebody who spent a lot of time building computers and programming in the early days, and now, it's just as those girls were saying, that someone has got

an interest in science fiction, bit of technology. And also, the other one was if you ask this question on Twitter then you are a geek.

[Laughter]

AS: **Kieron, are you a geek?**

KS: I don't think I am.

AS: **You just told us yourself that asking the question on Twitter makes you a geek which would mean that you are. [Laughter].**

KS: I don't think I agree with that, though.

VC: It seems to have positive stereotypes as well as negative.

AS: **Victoria, how about you?**

VC: Well, it's interesting. Martha and Miranda seem to… Martha was describing it in a way which had negative connotations and she's almost going into role then, talking how a geek would. But also, it's attached to these ideas of being intelligent and competent with using technology so there's the positive and the negative there.

AS: **That's certainly the definition that I use when I call myself a geek.**

VC: Barney, are you a geek?

Ba: I don't think I am a geek but a lot of people would probably consider me a geek and I am quite aware that they would.

AS: **Mark, what about you?**

MG: Well, interestingly, we've just done a paper called Geek or Chic. We looked at people's stereotypes and how they see gamers. Almost universally, geek is seen as something that has negative connotations, unfortunately. It's just much to do with looks and unfortunately people see geek as maybe an acne-ridden teenager in their bedroom who spends twenty-three hours a day on the computer and the thing about stereotypes is there's nearly always a grain of truth in the stereotype.

AS: **Has nobody heard of geek-chic? Come on, you guys.**

[Laughter]

AS: **So we are wrapping up now. I just want to go round the table and ask you what games are you playing at the moment? And Angry Birds counts, by the way. Kieron?**

KS: Well, Angry Birds was yesterday evening. I dipped into Second Life. I failed to understand Minecraft and I failed to play Halo: Reach successfully, that was in the last two days.

AS: **My word. [Laughter]. Victoria?**

VC: It's alright. I haven't played any games lately.

AS: Not even on your mobile phone?

VC: No.

AS: Barney?

Ba: It would probably take too long to list.

[Laughter]

Ba: But, I mean, the main ones are just the big games that I've been interested in personally.

AS: And, Mark, do you play any games?

MG: Yeah, I do, and, unfortunately, I am one of these people that I will not pick up a game unless I know I have got six hours to burn because I am such a type A achievement oriented person. But in fact, my partner recently bought me one of those retro sets which had Pac-Man, Space Invaders, Galaxians. I have been spending hours on it. It's just fantastic. It's just brought things back to when, you know, I was 12 or 13. Gaming, for me, once I start, I just can't stop.

AS: That's my problem as well, I have to say. I've finished Angry Birds, I am very proud to say, three stars on every level, yay! So thank you all for taking part. That was such a wonderful discussion. Dr Victoria Cooper, Dr Kieron Sheehy, Professor Mark Griffiths and Barney.