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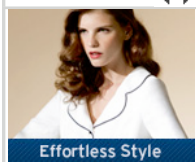
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Internet savvy children live in techno-Narnia

By Mary Riddell

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 27/03/2008

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Alice has moved on. Today's child has access to a world more perplexing than the universe Lewis Carroll's heroine found beneath the rabbit hole. The modern version of the story of a pre-teenager lost in a fantasy realm could be entitled Alice in Cyberspace.

• Curbs on computer games to protect children

Earlier this week, research by the Institute of Public Policy Research warned Britons are "being raised online". Youngsters spend more than 20 hours a week in a virtual life, chiefly on social networking sites, such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#) and [Bebo](#).

Dr Tanya Byron, a child psychologist and television presenter, will launch her much-anticipated report. Byron, commissioned by Gordon Brown to review online risks and video games, wants a "national strategy for child internet safety", in which Government undertakes both to teach parents about computer literacy and to issue tough rules to industry.



Previous gulfs between generations, such as views on sex and music, have been replaced by the digital divide

"Web 2.0", or social networking sites, should, in Byron's view, be compelled to apply rigorous security measures, such as privacy standards, and be tightly regulated. The classification of computer games must be overhauled. Ministers have already conceded privately they will do exactly what Byron asks. Although she emphasises the benefits of the internet, the risks she identifies will inflame existing fears of a cyber-domain containing horrors undreamed of by Carroll's heroine.

Where Old Alice had merely to cope with a Mad Hatter, New Alice may be negotiating the [Miss Bimbo website](#), on which pre-pubescent girls are encouraged to keep their virtual characters "waif thin" with diet pills and buy them breast implant surgery. For violence, Old Alice saw the Queen of Hearts screeching for blood. Her modern equivalent can watch real-life happy slappings on [YouTube](#). One recent scene of brutality, entitled "Girl Beat Up In Street", had 1,300,000 hits.

No wonder the suspicion is growing that the internet is the lonely, threatening habitat of bullies and predators. The modern Wonderland stands accused by many of inciting narcissism, idleness, obesity and even suicide. While Byron argues children are also being "empowered", doom-mongers are unlikely to be so sanguine.

Cultural pessimists, however, have often been wrong. For example, the warning by the media theorist Marshall McLuhan that new technology would kill off books ushered in a publishing boom in which Virginia Wolf has not been wholly supplanted by the literary oeuvres of football WAGS. Serious subjects, such as history, also make bestsellers.

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Far from being dumbed down by the information age, we are smartening up. Jim Flynn, a New Zealand professor, has charted year-on-year rises in IQ scores across the world, and tests show that Britons' average IQ has risen 27 points since 1942. True, school leavers might know nothing of Clement Attlee or the nine-times table, but that's the fault of our education system. The cognitive labour demanded by games and assimilating detail is linked to better mental dexterity. Our brains have been reprogrammed.

But the internet also causes problems the Government failed to foresee when it first embraced the "knowledge economy" and the educational benefits of computers. As Kay Withers's IPPR report recalls, £6 million was invested to ensure schools got broadband and so escaped "the technological dark ages".

There was no mention then of parenting classes in new technology, or of forcing unscrupulous operators to stop selling vile computer games to small children. Though any suggestion that screen brutality triggers violence in children is unproved, as Byron allows, most people would agree that the internet has scope to alter vulnerable minds.

If the Government is reaping what it sowed, then parents are also in line for blame. As well as being a must-have learning tool, computers have become a diversion from the perilous outdoors. The street-corner paedophile, mostly a figment of over-anxious adult imagination, has mutated into the more pernicious web-stalker. Some children, far from being passive recipients of violence, are posting scenes of thuggery online. Others, by flaunting their identity, or posting drunken portraits on MySpace, are courting dangers peculiar to the online world. In our safety-obsessed society, risk has come home to roost.

Children are supposedly culprits, too. "Frankenkinder", spoilt, undisciplined brats bribed with



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games consoles, are the latest social curse to cross the Atlantic. Fear of "bad" children, and the monsters that beset them, is as old as fairytales. Even so, something odd is happening.

This is a century in which the gap between adults and children has, supposedly, been wiped out by the "kidult"; the Botoxed adult with hip-hop on the iPod and eternal youth in mind. Yet, at a time when adults have little or no knowledge of what their children do in cyberspace, the chasm between old and young has rarely been so wide. Previous gulfs between generations, such as views on sex and music, have been replaced by the digital divide.

Byron, who will personally deliver her report to Gordon Brown, is calling for a "social marketing campaign". Though no one is going to argue with a plea for more awareness and better safety, the limited power of the state to influence behaviour runs particularly thin in cyberspace.


Let us, by all means, have a clampdown on a dodgy industry and computer classes for grown-ups. Even if we cannot persuade our children to take up jigsaw puzzles, we will be better at ordering our Tesco shopping online. But equipping children to thrive on the internet cannot be learned from any social rulebook or state-sponsored seminars in geekishness.

Online security is best taught in the offline universe. That means giving children, of whom one in 10 has never been read a bedtime story, more parental time. It means teaching them that gratuitous cruelty is as insupportable in the virtual as in the real world. It means stopping sapping children's happiness by plying them with alcohol and junk food, or testing them to destruction in schools that too often offer a shameful education. But it also means crushing some adult myths of lost innocence.

As Robin Alexander, who is heading the Primary Review of education, hinted last week, we don't have a crisis of childhood. We have a crisis of alarmism. There is a risk that the Byron report, however sensible, will unleash that panic.

Children have always been seen as prey, at the mercy of any demon invented by adults. Just as the wolf did not kill Red Riding Hood, the big bad internet will not swallow up our babies. Some of its risks are avoidable and unacceptable. But children, resourceful and resilient, have always sought a private world, free from adult scrutiny. When playing fields are concreted over, playgrounds deemed out-of-bounds and youngsters plagued either by failure or the pressure to succeed, it's not surprising they retreat into a techno-Narnia

Parents and politicians cannot make this world wholly safe. Maybe the best they can offer, for all the talk of education and crackdowns, is to equip children better to deal with hazards placed in their way by adults. Byron's findings sound moderate and balanced. That may not defuse a media firestorm about the (largely unproved) evils of the internet. As the Queen shouted across the courtroom where Alice sat: "Sentence first - verdict afterwards."

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Well, last year I learnt html and a bit of CSS. This year I'm doing vector animations. I belong to various snark communities and can out-gross the kids any time, even though they do their best with [www.ratemypoo.com](#) (do not click if easily grossed).

My kids read books and their favourite vegetable is broccoli - I must be doing something wrong.

Posted by Julia Pew on March 27, 2008 9:44 PM

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Witnessed four teens leaving a cybercafe continuing the videogame in words, sunlight & sidewalk changed into physical attacks on the smallest eyeglass-wearing boy kicked in the head until one eye lost & money removed by the older three teens. No one aided the crying injured, battered & bleeding, clothes torn, crawling youngster, on the sidewalk, inches from fast vehicle traffic. From screen to senseless violence: Playmates to semi-killers. Frequently witnessed on other days, other individuals, some six years old.

Posted by Arlene on March 27, 2008 8:17 PM

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"We have a crisis of alarmism".

Hehe...

Posted by Sam on March 27, 2008 6:50 PM

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test

Posted by test on March 27, 2008 5:11 PM

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And remember folks, our new Tanya Byron ointment when rubbed on any PC screen gives that bathroom window glass appearance, allows light out but no sense can be made of it.

Rub some on your windows and that naughty old world just goes away.

Inside your car a real boon, those traffic jams just fade away without reducing your chances of survival on modern roads. Rub some on the wife, husband or girlfriend and all those nasty sharp edges will just fade away. A million and one uses and now available on the NHS.

Recommended by Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown who says my life was a misery with inflation and unemployment figures but after application of the ointment I can now read the DT at breakfast without need of a doctor.

Get some today.

Posted by A Farma Cyst on March 27, 2008 12:54 PM

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The problem with the Internet is, if you or your child goes off the rails, there is an online community to support and help them develop their insanity. This is an intractable problem, because giving up the Internet is inconceivable, and regulating it is impossible.

Posted by Eric Worrall on March 27, 2008 12:28 PM

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It is not what kids are doing with the internet that bothers me, after all parents could still try a bit of oversight once in a while or make access to certain sites impossible. No, it is what government and other institutions are doing that really scares me. The RIP act which I tried to do a humorous sketch on [link](#) several years ago, gives the government many powers that we would perhaps rather they didn't have.

Posted by pewkatchoo on March 27, 2008 11:01 AM

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Edward - If I may add to that.

I know at least two playgrounds close to where I live that the Council decided to close for fear of litigation. Note that, FEAR of litigation, not actual litigation.

Now, in all fairness, I suspect that the insurers rather than the Council themselves were the ones really behind the decision.

Who to blame there, feckless litigants? Lawyers on the make? the Council/insurers for being wimps? the local hacks for unquestioningly backing and egging on said feckless litigants? Probably a balance of all of them.

Funny thing is that the children next door and their parents are all perfectly happy to run the risk of a fall and grazed knee.

The government has done all it can, the Compensation Act makes clear that courts can factor in the desirability of having things like playgrounds, trees etc. This reinforced case law from many previous governments.

Too many people look to government as a magic bullet here - it is time to look where blame for hyper risk-aversion really lies.

Posted by Dara on March 27, 2008 11:01 AM
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Does anyone else find it odd that Brown commissioned a report from a TV expert? Surely hiring someone who is an expert in an industry in direct competition to video games is a bit off?

TV companies are increasingly worried about their viewers playing games instead being drones in front of the TV. TV viewership is down.

Considering the inaccuracies and idiocies peddled on TV about video games I have no faith in this report. Its just another excuse for government meddling. If you are interested in a piece about this whole thing please follow the link below.

As someone else has said. Would these people prefer children to be out getting into trouble? Surely entertaining themselves in an interactive way (rather than passive like TV) is a good thing?

Posted by Andrew Ian Dodge on March 27, 2008 10:17 AM
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Thus we protect our children from the many evils of this world so that when they grow up the shock of reality will break their minds. Sheesh!!

What puzzles me though is that a high horse is being mounted over the content of video games, yet only a month ago I had to avoid an explanation on what 'having sex with her dead body' meant, when my children, both under 10, heard it on the 6 o'clock news. Why get irate over the content of a game when the news is invariably worse. I would also like to hear how they are going to censor all my kid's friends from telling them about all these nasty things or showing them when they go to stay over for a night or two.

Posted by Jim on March 27, 2008 10:12 AM
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Tanya Bryan is the new doctor Spock then, a Raj Persaud for the minds of minors - able to spout column inches at will as a media personality rather than as a practitioner?

The only thing that is required re children and access to home computer equipment is parental common sense. Know what your child is doing, for how long and who with if on the internet.

Do not allow a child to use the PC in an area away from the family - and ration usage so that interaction in the flesh with other children and fresh air and exercise is also part of their day.

I don't think you need a child psychologist or the state to tell you this - just decent parents with common sense

Those who already abdicate the care of their child to a machine - so long as the offspring is out of their hair all day - as happens in countless homes, will not be listening to this advice.

Posted by simon coulter on March 27, 2008 10:03 AM
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A very serious associated problem is that children are just not playing out. The large playground and sportsfield near where I live is rarely used. In the six years I have lived here I have only once seen an impromptu game of soccer going on and never seen any young people playing cricket or other games. What I have regularly seen is a group of miserable looking youths sitting on their wheelie type bikes looking bored out of their minds.

Someone had better teach them to play proper games or they will continue to have empty, aimless and non competitive lives

Posted by Edward on March 27, 2008 9:45 AM
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One wonders how many of the young men who joined the army and found it too much for them when they discovered the real horrors of war had played computer games and fancied themselves as a hotshot soldier? Most of them I suspect.

Assuming this to be so, one must conclude that computer games are simply not nasty enough. Were they suitably realistic it is unlikely the army would have any takers at all except for a few psychopaths.

Posted by meditek on March 27, 2008 9:03 AM
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If this government didn't have something to interfere with it would invent it.

Posted by Simon Marshland on March 27, 2008 8:41 AM
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Some random points:

Most computer games are less violent than Shakespeare. The violence isn't real, it's symbolic and incidental to the goal of solving puzzles and completing the game.

People can't be beaten up in virtual reality e.g. the YouTube victim wasn't beaten up online.

'Techno-Narnia' is just as real as the other Narnia, and it is vastly more complicated. (I speak as a C.S. Lewis fan.)

Reading books is encouraged now, but books were treated with suspicion when they first became popular. For example, girls were often banned from reading them.

On the one hand the author suggests that computer games are for undisciplined minds; yet she also concedes that they require mental dexterity.

Jigsaw puzzles aren't really that interesting. People mostly just use them meditatively.

Being able to remember facts like 9*9 and

Clement Attlee's birthday is far less important than knowing how to search for facts online.

Posted by ThomasR on March 27, 2008 7:11 AM

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First you have to ask who started this and I would assume a young adult man. Second you have to ask why would this start and where should the responsibility and blame be placed and I say the breast implant manufacturers and plastic surgeons who claim a woman or girl needs plastic surgery nowadays to even be accepted as a woman. Then we have the health agencies who have been in my opinion bought and paid for to allow these products to even be on the market today.

Then we have our governments who take what they call campaign financing from these people above, I call them bribes, and what happens then we have people starting these sites up like this bimbo site.

Even the name of it makes me sick to my stomach.

Unfortunately though this is the people plastic surgeons and the like are banking on walking through their doors with the help of a sick twisted individual who designed this site.

Whoever designed this site needs to be charged and he is playing with girls who are under age and it is dangerous. Can anyone imagine what this could do to a young teenage girl's life.

This to me is no different than a pedophile stalking a child.

Parents in my mind do have an obligation to make their child's world safe and so does the government after all who created this fiasco.

Parents have to monitor their kids' usage on the net, the government's responsibility is to make sure people like this are prosecuted.

If it wasn't for the above mentioned people I brought up and reality T.V I believe this would not be going on but when you get shows like extreme makeover and the likes of them it is headed for trouble and why is simple it is all geared towards girls and young adult women.

Society today is sick when men still feel a woman's chest and plastic surgery is the answer to a girl's problems. I can't even finish writing this anymore because this world to me is going nuts, women are driving me crazy because they have the power to stop this behavior against other women and they don't do a thing.

Posted by sandra hunt on March 27, 2008 6:10 AM

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This is a perennial problem and mostly it's a problem caused by the very adults who complain about it.

Firstly, as children, we were also disparaged by our parents' generation (I'm 40) as the children who had everything, who hadn't been through rationing etc etc. They didn't have TV or trips abroad (yet according to my late Grandmother you couldn't get my father off the radio and he had toys my grandfather never had etc etc.)

Children can't go and roam any more because the left have made sure that the streets are so full of bad people's children that they would probably be attacked and robbed.

If they are playing computer games they probably aren't drinking, smoking or taking drugs. What do you think they would be doing if video games weren't around... watching television like you did or listening to the radio like your father did or reading comic books like your grandfather did.

Posted by Thor Halland on March 27, 2008 5:31 AM

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Mary Riddell has written an important article for the benefit of parents, guardians, teenagers and society at large in the Internet and Multimedia Age. We, often, decry movies, television, Internet, Gangsta Rap music as purveyors of deviant culture and instruments of dysfunctionality. Ms. Riddell, along with the forthcoming 224-report; including the abridged children's version, authored by a leading clinical psychologist, will show far more devious repercussions of unregulated, unrestricted video games on teenagers, minors or children.

Here, the problem is not video games. It's the contents. Censorship applies mostly to minors. Nobody shows them anything that could undermine their righteous sensibilities, until they are old enough to make their lawful decisions.

Until then, the society, government, guardians, schools, parents and other institutions--act loco parentis--in place of parents--on their behalf. That's why movies are rated mainly for general audience or restricted against minors. Movie renters follow the law. Television programmers do the same. News broadcasters and other media organizations obey the rules. But, it seems that, along with the raw-music industry, video programmers and producers have been too egregious in following the same rules of censorship for the interest of teenagers and minors.

They can produce all they want--graphic or otherwise. But, they can't market smut to minors. It's like the same rules of alcohol, beer, tobacco and cigarette sales; including other regulated products of health, mind and behavior endangerment regulated by government and delegated authorities. They can't be sold to minors. Here, in the United States, minors have to produce a valid ID or driver's license to show age, competence and purchase eligibility. But, ironically, video games have fallen through the loopholes and cracks of laws and legislations that need to be updated in the evolving Internet Age. So, there is pressure on lawmakers and administrations to update the video-games sale and distribution laws to protect minors; especially, when movie versions of the violent games were released, and parents saw a sample of what their children watch or have been watching.

A lot of them have graphic violence, sexual themes, illegal drugs, car jacking, racist diatribes, hate-crimes episodes and instruments of mass destruction in the plots and operations. There was even a US case of an unrated video-game Christmas gift a parent bought and gave her son;

only to find out later that it contained graphic-sex scenes. Negotiations were still going on the last time I followed the news, between the parent and market system, to find out who would be held accountable.

Again, the problem is not production. It's marketing, display, showing, entertainment and distribution to minors and teenagers. The US Supreme Court struck down the Communication Indecency Act as it applied to the Internet; because, adults cannot bear the burden of censorship and free expression. Translation: It's the responsibility of parents, society, government and institutions to find fair ways to apply censorship in the interest and protection of children. That's why there are children's sections in libraries where they use filtered versions of the Internet--with restricted web sites. That's why most elementary and high-school computers have user-regulations with some degree of web-site restrictions. The same standard should apply to video games.

The authoritative 70,000-member American Psychological Association speaks for the society and many parents, when it summarizes its conclusion that: "violent video games can increase children's aggression, but that parents moderate the negative effects." Look here: Parents have a greater responsibility in monitoring what children do--watch or play with. If it's harmful stop it. If it's corrupt, confiscate it. Igonikon Jack, USA

Posted by Igonikon Jack on March 27, 2008 5:18 AM
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How many times has this been a news story?

Every so often it arises again.

Yet there is plenty of contradictory evidence that computer games are beneficial.

For pity's sake. Stop this interference. Why must these do-gooders keep constantly interfering?

Posted by richard on March 27, 2008 3:14 AM
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The biggest threat to children is not having access to the cynical way that the adult world treats them. The internet is starting to blow our cover.

Posted by Charles Frith on March 27, 2008 3:03 AM
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