

The pressure of internet 'games and challenges'

The internet can be a very dark place for young people, as journalist R. E. Hunt explains...

The internet is a great place for learning new things, socialising, and finding fun games to pass the time. However, it's important to be aware of all the dangers that are lurking online, and how you can avoid them and keep yourself safe. This isn't something teachers, parents or online-experts say to be patronising and annoying (these people go to great efforts to also keep themselves safe online, for various reasons). Focusing back on teens and young people - it is this demographic that are often targeted by trolls who seem to have no other purpose than to cause misery and pain to their victims.

Over the past few years, there have been a number of games and challenges appearing that at first seem harmless, but in fact have encouraged children to harm themselves or even to commit suicide. The latest of these the 'Momo Challenge' has indeed turned out to be a rather grotesque hoax - yet we cannot let that fact distract us from the reality which influenced the creators of the Momo Challenge - there are online trolls who wish to see young people come to harm.

You may recently have heard of the Momo challenge in news media recently, a game featuring a scary looking character with black hair and bulging eyes. This is said to be a type of 'challenge' game which targets young children by 'hacking into' popular games and videos such as Peppa Pig and Fortnite. It is said that the scary 'Momo' character then contacts children via WhatsApp, sending them violent images before challenging them to harm themselves with the threat that their family will be killed if



they do not agree. Although the Momo challenge has been all over the news, UK charities such as the Samaritans and NSPCC have said that there is little evidence that the challenge exists or that it has led to any self-harm or injuries. It is thought that the rumours have been spread because of the panic and fear of adults - which is probably exactly what the designers intended. In fact, and ironically, probably more young children have seen Momo from the news sites warning against it than ever would have organically (because we have no evidence that Momo actually is popping upon on the WhatsApp of any young people).

Although there may be no need to panic about Momo, there have been similar challenges which have appeared and spread over the internet which have been linked to injuries and deaths. The 'Blue Whale' suicide game first entered the news in 2015. It takes the form of a series of challenges communicated to children through social media. The challenges become increasingly dangerous and end in the child being told to end their own life. Although all the deaths associated with the 'game' seem to have taken place in Russia and police have caught the criminal behind it, it shows just how easily these things can spread and how some children can be manipulated into harming themselves over the internet.

Other harmful games have become popular because of YouTube. One of these is known as the 'Cinnamon Challenge', a dangerous prank that was shown on a number of video channels popular with children. It is the type of game which can seem harmless, as cinnamon is an ingredient commonly used in food and is harmless in small amounts. However, eating too much cinnamon can cause choking, irritation and trouble breathing, which can easily lead to death. The challenge resulted in a number of calls to poisoning hotlines in the US and the UK.

Some challenges are more obviously harmful. The 'choking game' hit the news headlines last year, and is a 'game' which involves self-

strangulation to cut off the oxygen supply that your brain needs for you to stay alive and conscious. It has been said that this produces a brief 'high' - a good feeling which makes the activity pleasurable. However, the game has been linked to over 80 deaths in the US, with dozens more injured.

It's easy to think that you would see the dangers in such games and that you would never participate. However, some internet 'challenges' can seem harmless at first, and only become dangerous later. It can also be tempting to try something that everyone else seems to be doing, especially if it seems fun or different. And especially if you can boast to your friends that you've done it - but really - would a true friend be impressed by that or would they instead be seriously concerned for your wellbeing?

Whenever you see anyone participating in a prank or game on the internet or YouTube, it's important to remember that what you are seeing is probably not the whole story - just because they did something and were not harmed, does not mean you won't be.

If you are ever tempted to copy something you see on the internet or to take part in a game or challenge - use your critical thinking skills and don't be a sheep. Occasionally challenges will come along which don't cause serious harm - the ice bucket challenge was one innocuous example which was intended to raise money for Motor Neurone Disease, for example. Yet if something feels wrong, shady, dark or makes you feel uncomfortable - then go with your gut. Show a trusted adult or teacher. That isn't a failing on your part - that is a wise and mature decision. This is what adults do too - how many of us do you think get spam emails every day and call over a friend to say, 'check this out, legit or spam?' It happens!

The adults that care about you want to protect you - your teachers, guardians, your older siblings - you know who they are. You don't

have to immediately hand your phone over - just tell them what the site is. Let them check it out.

Let's look at the situation of risk-games logically and subjectively. A weird online creature, or message from an unknown number or avatar tells you to attempt to choke yourself - for instance. What benefit is there to you of getting close to choking - none at all - and a possible horrendous consequence. I don't need to spell out here how many lives could be ruined if you did something so stupid. What gain is there to the to the video creator? Notoriety. Do you want to risk death or injury to let some spotty, sad-case in their bedroom gain their 15 minutes of fame? Probably not when you stop and think about it! You are worth so, so much more than that - everyone is.

Don't feed the trolls!

Now you have read the article, choose a set of challenges to answer:

Challenging

1. Describe what the writer might mean by the phrase 'grotesque hoax.'
2. Identify TWO reasons why the writer is concerned about young people's online safety.
3. Highlight all the connective phrases that are used in this article.
4. Write out the sentence which proves that online challenges can have serious consequences.

More Challenging

1. Describe the irony behind the publicity gained by the Momo Challenge.
2. Highlight and label THREE stylistic techniques that the writer of this

article has used in order to interest the reader.

3. Define the words 'notoriety' and 'innocuous'. Use each word in a sentence of your own. You can use a dictionary if you need to.

Mega Challenging

1. Explain whether you think the writer is concerned that young people are put off by advice merely due to the fact it is issued by adults. Explain your reasoning using quotes from the text.

2. Highlight any metaphors and superlatives that you can spot in this text. What is the effect of using these?

3. How formal or informal is this text? How does this help the writer to achieve their purpose? Explain your answer in detail, using evidence to support your points.

