



# Gaming in Families

## Final Report

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# 1. Executive summary

Video games<sup>1</sup> are hugely important for many young people. They play as individuals, with friends and, in some homes, with parents and siblings. Yet, little is known about how games are played as families and, consequently, how families perceive and negotiate the benefits and risks of family gaming. This study addressed these issues in order to support gaming in families and address issues of concern. For this purpose, a literature review was conducted; a national survey was then commissioned, followed by interviews about video games playing within families by parents and children. From these activities were developed which were designed to enhance family game play, these were tested out in workshops for their effectiveness and popularity.

## Key findings

Parents and young people, that is, those aged 5-15, perceived that there were benefits to playing video games as a family, with the main motivation being enjoyment.

Parents and young people reported the following benefits from playing video games together:

- parents are provided with an opportunity to review and understand the games that their children are playing
- parents are able to ensure that their children are playing age-appropriate games
- parents are able to moderate games so that children learn social skills such as collaboration, turn taking and sporting behaviour
- games provide opportunities for further communication between parents and their children
- games provide opportunities for discussion of sensitive issues of morality, particularly in relation to warfare and fighting.

<sup>1</sup> By gaming and video gaming we are including all video, computer and digital games of any genre, that is, not only those loaded onto a PC but those on the internet – single or multi-player, those played using a handheld device (including mobile phones) or via a console such as PlayStations or the Wii. We are excluding gambling although including casual (ie intuitive, accessible and easy to play) games.

Parents and young people said that the most enjoyable video games to play together – particularly where some players were beginners – were games with easy to understand interfaces. These included games where turns were either relatively short and well-defined, such as active and fitness games like bowling or hula hooping, or where players could play at the same time rather than taking turns, for example racing games or action games like Lego Batman where players could collaborate.

A number of parents in the interviews and workshops were unaware of game age ratings and the meanings of content icons and therefore could not use this information to guide them and their children. Some of these parents allowed their children to play games designated as appropriate for older children.

Some parents were unaware of the facility to set up parental controls on games consoles whilst others believed their children would simply overcome these restrictions.

Some parents needed greater awareness of the video games their children were playing in order to effectively monitor their playing and set appropriate limits and controls. Playing games as a family can provide an opportunity to do this.

To address the above points, parents said that they needed more information about where to find information about video games – both the content and techniques for playing, parental controls, and age ratings. Their preference was for this to be provided in a brief accessible form with a URL given for further guidance.

## Summary of findings from the survey

The survey conducted in August 2009 found that:

- 39% of parents played video games alone, and 36% of parents had played video games with a 3-16 year-old in the last six months.

- Young people were more likely to play video games alone (79% playing at least a few times a week) and 64% of 5-15 year-olds said they had played video games with adults in the last six months.
- Parents were more likely to play with primary school children (28%) than older children (8%); 70% of children under 11 and 57% of young people over 11 reported playing with adults, predominantly parents and older siblings.
- Almost three in five adults who had played video games with a 3-16 year-old in the last six months played with a son more frequently (58%), while less than two in five play with a daughter the most (37%). The young people stated they were more likely to play with males: 41% said they had played with their father and 12% with brothers/stepbrothers over 16, while 38% said they had played with their mother and 4% with sisters/step sisters over 16.
- The survey found that the vast majority of adults who had played video games with their children did it for fun (72%), while 21% played purely because they were asked and 10% because they felt it was something that parents did. The most important reason for playing given by children who play with parents was for fun (49%) and to spend time with that adult (23%).
- The proportion of young people who said they would like to spend the same amount of time playing video games as a family as they do now (56%) closely matches the parents' results (55%). Adults were more likely to state that they would like to spend less time playing video games with their children (19% compared to 6% of young people), whereas young people were more likely to state they would like to spend more time (29% compared to 12%).
- For both parents and young people, the most popular games played in intergenerational groups were active technology and fitness games (in the last six months 44% of parents had played these with children, while 85% of 8-10 year-olds and 53% of 11-15 year-olds had played such games with adults), and sport and racing games (in the last six months 40% of parents had played these with children, 63-65% of 8-10 year-olds

and 53% of 11-15 year-olds had played such games with adults).

- Parents were more likely to play puzzles and educational games with younger children (42% of 8-10 years old said they had played such games with adults in contrast to 22% of 11-15 year-olds), while adults were more likely to play fighting and adventure games with 11-15 year-olds (52% of 11-15 year-olds said they had played these games in the last six months with adults). The least popular games to play in intergenerational groups regardless of age were Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) (5% of parents and 19% of 11-15 year-olds said they had played such games over the last six months).

### Summary of findings from the interviews

In the interviews with parents and young people, the benefits and risks for game playing were addressed and the survey findings further explored. The main benefits for parents and young people reported were:

- Enjoyment – this was given as the main reason for playing.
- Development of social skills, such as collaboration, turn-taking, being sporting and, to a lesser extent, skills such as reading and logic.

Reasons for not playing included:

- Wanting time for other family activities (expressed by both parents and young people). Families considered that spending time together as a family was key; the activity was less important.
- Young people wanting independence to play games away from parental supervision; and parents allowing their children this autonomy.

- Needing to prioritise other tasks such as homework, having time for exercise, not wishing to spend too much time alone in front of a screen (again, expressed by both parents and young people).

Both parents and young people said that their main sources of information about games were friends. One or two parents said that they used the internet to read reviews and occasionally buy games. It was not used as a source of information for advice on appropriate family games, or techniques to improve enjoyment. Moreover, the parents interviewed said that they would not think to use the internet for this purpose or for instructions on setting up parental controls on games consoles.

### Summary of findings from the workshops

In the workshops it emerged that playing video games as a family was not something that families necessarily found easy. How the family interacted around the gaming activities appeared to depend on pre-existing family relationships. For instance, one family collaborated well around a novel interface, the EyePet, whereas in another family one player was seen to dominate and the others lost interest. The family's ability to derive pleasure from family games was highly influenced by the level of participation by each family member. Activities where young people were encouraged to tutor their parents were enjoyed by all. Interestingly, the type of game - whether competitive or collaborative - seemed to have little influence on levels of enjoyment in the workshop. Nevertheless, where family members consistently 'lost' when playing the game, they seemed to lose interest and play less. The young people in the workshops were not always able tutors despite greater gaming experience and some parents said that they would need more advice and support in future to improve their competence and confidence.

In the interviews and workshops, the most appropriate games for families with beginner gamers were those with accessible, easy to understand interfaces and where each turn was relatively short and well defined. Competitive games were enjoyed as they allowed adults and children to compete equally as some games can reduce differences in physical ability. Games where players

could collaborate by playing on the same team were also enjoyed.

Previous research has shown the benefits of discussion around gaming. These can include young people being more able to transfer skills such as problem solving from games to non-gaming activities. Likewise, discussing morality in first person shooter games ensures that issues with fighting and shooting games can be explored. However, the workshops showed that for families encouraging discussion requires much more than prompts based on game content; the families' established relationships and patterns of communication with one another are also very important.

In the workshops one of the activities involved reviewing existing information around game age ratings. It was notable how few of the parents involved in the study were aware of the age ratings guidance and the meanings of content icons. Moreover, some parents' knowledge of parental controls was also limited whilst other parents said they did not set up parental controls because they believed that their children would overcome the restrictions. Other parents had missed the instructions that came with the console.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations for policy, parents and industry were identified on the basis of the research.

For policy:

- Firstly parents need to be aware of where to find information on gaming. This is currently available in multiple locations and requires searching to find on the internet. Given parents do not use the internet as an initial means of finding information about video games, publicity is required for sites that contain this information.
- The standardised PEGI ratings and content icons need to be publicised more widely.
- Any publicity material distributed for parents needs to be short and snappy with a URL given for further guidance.

- It would be helpful to publish advice around gaming in family orientated magazines with an associated URL .
- Local authorities should consider providing game sessions in family places, such as libraries and Sure Start Centres to overcome the cost barrier which is present for some families. They could also provide parents with the support they need in terms of skills and knowledge to play games.

#### For parents:

- Playing video games as a family can be fun and provide an opportunity to spend time together as a family. Other potential benefits can include developing children’s social skills such as turn taking and playing fairly; and understanding better what your children are playing so you can more appropriately guide and oversee their activities.
- Make sure all members of the family are happy with the games chosen to play.
- Especially for beginner gamers, try to identify games that do not require an enormous time investment and which can be played in shorter chunks to fit in with other responsibilities.
- Aim to play games which engage all members of the family at the same time to facilitate greater engagement.
- Keep the console in a shared space so it is easy to play together and to oversee children’s activities.

- Parents may find it helpful to try different techniques which can enhance enjoyment and potentially learning. These may include, for example, asking questions about tactics and issues while playing, specifically letting children act as tutors, choosing games where there is a need to learn how to interact simultaneously, and playing games with a strong competitive or collaborative element.

#### For industry:

- Parents would like to see age ratings and other information screened when the game is loading (not just on the box).
- Parents would like to see what kind of time commitment is needed to play the game before starting.
- Parents would like to see more guidance about how to play each game.
- Parents would like to see which games enable beginners and more experienced players to compete more equally.

## 2. Gaming in Families: Project introduction and structure

### Introduction

The main focus of the project was to understand how families perceive the benefits and risks of family gaming in order to further support families and address issues of concern.

The benefits and risks to children's wellbeing and learning associated with playing video games have been highlighted as an area for urgent research by the Byron Review<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, The Children's Plan<sup>3</sup> and the Harnessing Technology for Next Generation Learning: Children, schools and families implementation plan 2009-2012<sup>4</sup> have identified the importance of parents and families on children's learning. As Rose M Kundanis makes clear in Children, Teens, Families, and Mass Media<sup>5</sup>, the role of both new media and parents is hugely influential in children's development and their education: the two both complement and contradict each other, each accorded more or less influence according to social context. Given this, it is important to understand the differing ways in which video games are used and perceived in family settings, including parents' and children's attitudes towards gaming. It is also necessary to understand which games are used where families play together, what the benefits and risks might be and how family gaming can be enhanced.

This report details the findings from the 2009-2010 Becta commissioned project 'Gaming in Families'. The literature review and the Ipsos MORI survey results have been published separately as full reports<sup>6</sup>. This

document includes the key results from these along with findings from interviews with ten families who classified themselves as gaming families and three family workshops focused on gaming. The key audience for this report is policy-makers. However, the report also contains recommendations for parents and industry and may also be of interest to educators.

This project was run at the same time as the work carried out by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS)<sup>7</sup>. The Council was launched in September 2008 to implement the recommendations in the Byron Review Action Plan<sup>8</sup>. The focus of UKCCIS is to help parents and their children get the most from new media such as the internet and video games, while protecting children from inappropriate or harmful material. The Council has recently published advice on internet safety for children and their parents<sup>9</sup> and made recommendations about video game ratings<sup>10</sup>.

### Method

There were five stages to the project. The literature review and the following stages of the project were informed by an Expert Panel. This panel included academics, policy makers (DCSF), games developers through the Entertainment & Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA), third sector organisations (Childnet) and those that classify games (British Board of Film Classification – BBFC)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The Byron review is an independent review looking at the risks to children from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games - [www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview).

<sup>3</sup> The revised Children's Plan can be found at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan).

<sup>4</sup> The implementation plan can be found at [publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=39547&page=1835](http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=39547&page=1835).

<sup>5</sup> This book looks at children's experiences with and personal relationships with the mass media. To understand the experiences, the book examines the children at various developmental ages and across generations. Kundanis R (2003), Children, Teens, Families and Mass Media: The Millennial Generation, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit\\_reviews/Gaming\\_in\\_Families\\_review\\_09.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit_reviews/Gaming_in_Families_review_09.pdf) and [www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project\\_reports/becta/Gaming\\_in\\_Families\\_survey\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project_reports/becta/Gaming_in_Families_survey_analysis.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.dcsf.gov.uk/ukccis/index.cfm?id=home\\_page](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ukccis/index.cfm?id=home_page).

<sup>8</sup> The Action Plan can be found at: [www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/actionplan\\_final.PDF](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/actionplan_final.PDF).

<sup>9</sup> The Click Clever Click Safe campaign can be found at [clickcleverclicksafe.direct.gov.uk/index.html](http://clickcleverclicksafe.direct.gov.uk/index.html).

<sup>10</sup> Legislation around standardising age ratings is included in the Digital Economy Bill and is discussed in the Byron Progress Review published at the end of March 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A for a description of the participants and activities of the daylong seminar

The literature review found that there was little information about gaming as a family and virtually no information on young people's opinions on gaming in families. However, some previous research concluded that gaming may help young people learn a variety of skills, such as teambuilding, problem-solving and management skills. These could include resource allocation, negotiating with friends and adversaries, manipulating situations and environments, actively pursuing goals and recovering from failures. These ideas informed the project as a whole.

On the basis of the expert panel and literature review, Ipsos MORI were commissioned to conduct a nationwide survey in August 2009<sup>12</sup>. A representative sample of 558 parents or legal guardians of children under 16 were interviewed throughout Great Britain; and a representative sample of 737 children aged 5-15 were surveyed. The survey focused on the types of games played, who played, and why, or not, family gaming occurred.

The results of this survey were analysed and ten families who classified themselves as gaming families were interviewed to deepen understanding. These families responded to a request made through nationwide organisations such as the Fatherhood Institute, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), and Futurelab's network of local schools and contacts. The young people and adults were interviewed separately in their own homes, each interview was recorded and the data analysed<sup>13</sup>. The questions concerned typical gaming sessions, motivations for playing, what benefits and risks they perceived and had experienced, what kit they had, what roles they took when gaming (for example, as teacher, monitor, technician) and what they would recommend to others. They also kept a games diary for three weeks after the interview.

Based on this information and the previous project stages, activities were developed and tried out with eleven families in three workshops with children ranging from 5 to 16. The families were contacted through Futurelab's network of local schools.

The workshops consisted of two activities: 1) parents and children independently reviewing existing methods of sharing information using various media (video, web pages, and printed) around game playing and games, and 2) trialling techniques as a family to enhance the family game playing experience<sup>14</sup>. In the former the discussions were recorded. In the latter the families were observed and they individually assessed each activity on two scales: usefulness and fun. A brief description of the techniques can be found in Table 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B for a description of the survey method, the survey results can be found at [www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project\\_reports/becta/Gaming\\_in\\_Families\\_survey\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project_reports/becta/Gaming_in_Families_survey_analysis.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C for details of the interviewees and key findings.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix D for details of the workshop participants and key findings.



**Table 1: Workshop activities**

Activity	Description	Activity	Description
<b>Questionnaire</b>	Parents and children were asked to independently write down their own favourite game, the favourite game of their parents or child, when they last played as a family and the child's favourite book. They compared answers and discussed discrepancies.	<b>Learning together</b> (EyePet <sup>15</sup> on the PlayStation3)	The families were given the EyePet to groom and feed. This game has a novel interface and the family were asked to figure out how to interact with the pet together (which is tricky given the three dimensional nature of the experience).
<b>Questioning</b> (Lego Batman on the Xbox)	The family had two controllers and were asked to play together. One played Batman™ and one Robin™ and one of their tasks was to fight the Riddler™, an arch enemy, and his men. After about five minutes they were asked to discuss a given list of questions such as their character role in the game and the aim of the game.		This was new to all participants and the tasks encouraged discussion.
	The idea was to promote discussion about the morality and purpose of playing.	<b>Competition and collaboration</b> (Mario Karts on connected Nintendo DS consoles)	In one race the players had to beat each other, in the second they were on the same team.  This activity was to investigate when competition and collaboration were appropriate given previous findings.
<b>Defined roles</b> (Hula Hooping on the Wii fit)	The family chose one "teacher" and one "technician" as well as players. The "teacher" had to instruct the "technician" how to open Wii Fit hula hooping and, if necessary, how to choose a Mii, as well as keep score if required.  This ensured that everyone had an opportunity to learn how to set up the game, and help develop skills such as giving, and receiving, instruction.		

<sup>15</sup> For details on the EyePet functionality see [www.eyepet.com/meeteyepet/features/](http://www.eyepet.com/meeteyepet/features/).

# 3. Findings around current family video game playing

This section begins by describing patterns of current family video game playing. For example, the numbers that play, choice of games, time spent playing, and knowledge around age ratings and parental controls. The second part lists the benefits, risks and concerns that were raised by family members around game play.

## Overview of family gaming

In this section, the findings from the literature review, survey, interviews and workshops are combined to identify a picture of family gaming.

## Literature review key findings

The literature review identified that there was no clear definition of a gamer and that children had rarely been asked about how and why they play video games with their parents. The literature review suggested that games console ownership is more likely among young people than older, with around 88% of those aged between 8 and 15 owning a console. Figures from Ofcom show console ownership is increasing<sup>16</sup> and in 2009 households owned on average 2.4 consoles<sup>17</sup>.

From this research, parents' concerns around children playing video games include:

- the cost of games and associated equipment
- their own experiences, the safety of their children
- violence within games
- time spent playing
- the impact on the child's social abilities and the location in which games are played.

Parents play with their children because:

- they are asked
- it is fun
- they can spend time with their children
- they can monitor the games and the time spent playing.

Parents do not play games due to:

- lack of time
- games being 'boring'
- expense
- violence within games
- a belief that they are for children and are too complicated<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> See Figure 1 in the Ofcom report 'UK children's media literacy 2009 interim report'. ([www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/uk\\_childrens\\_ml/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/uk_childrens_ml/full_report.pdf))

<sup>17</sup> See the 2009 O2 commissioned report 'Digital Families. Exploring the role of technology in modern family life' ([www.news.o2.co.uk/imagelibrary/downloadMedia.ashx?MediaDetailsID=658](http://www.news.o2.co.uk/imagelibrary/downloadMedia.ashx?MediaDetailsID=658)).

<sup>18</sup> See [www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit\\_reviews/Gaming\\_in\\_Families\\_review\\_09.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit_reviews/Gaming_in_Families_review_09.pdf) for the full literature review findings.

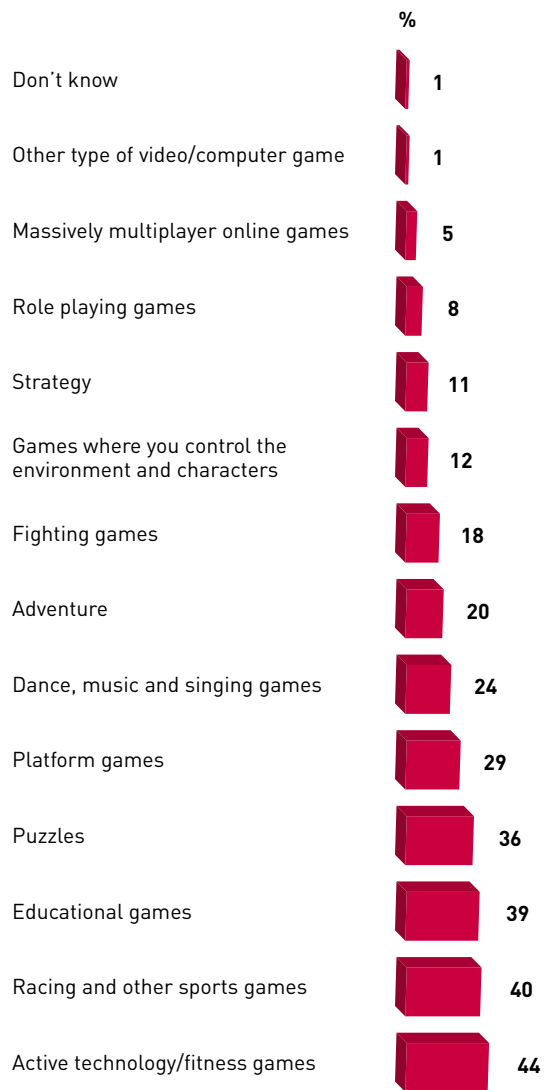
### Ipsos MORI key findings

As stated, the Ipsos MORI nationwide survey was conducted to update and expand the literature review findings. The survey found that in the last six months 39% of parents played video games alone, while 36% of parents had played video games with a 3-16 year-old. In contrast, young people were more likely to play video games alone (79% playing at least a few times a week) and 64% of 5-15 year-olds said they had played video games with adults in the last six months. Parents were more likely to play with primary school children (28%) compared to older children (8%); although according to young people themselves, 70% of those who played with adults are under 11 and 57% are over 11. These proportions do not equate to those of the parents, which might suggest that parents play with multiple children as well as confirmed the fact that young people play games with older siblings as well as parents.

Almost three in five adults who had played video games with 3-16 year-olds in the last six months played with a son the most (58%), while less than two in five played with a daughter the most (37%). Similarly, young people most commonly mentioned their parents as the adults they spend the most amount of time playing video games with (41% say they play with their father the most and 38% with their mother). However, 11-15 year-olds were also likely to play games with siblings over 16 (especially brothers/stepbrothers – 24%, in contrast to 5% with older sisters/stepsisters) or other adults. Only 1% of this age group played with grandparents – predominantly grandmothers, and even less 5-10 year-olds played with grandparents.

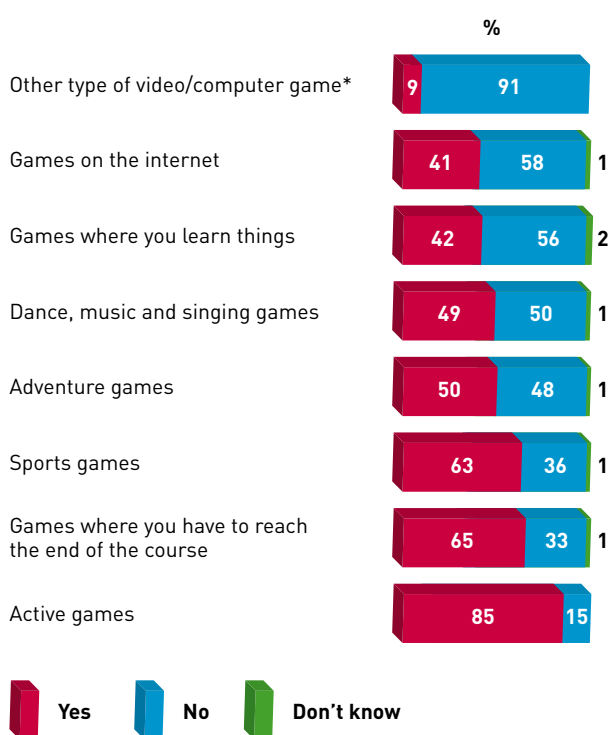
Table 2 shows the most commonly played games by genre that parents said they had played with their children aged 3-15 in the last six months. There is a focus on active technology and fitness games, racing and sports games, and educational games and puzzles. Families were less likely to play fighting games involving control of the environment and characters, strategy and role playing games.

**Table 2: Games adults play with children aged 3-15**



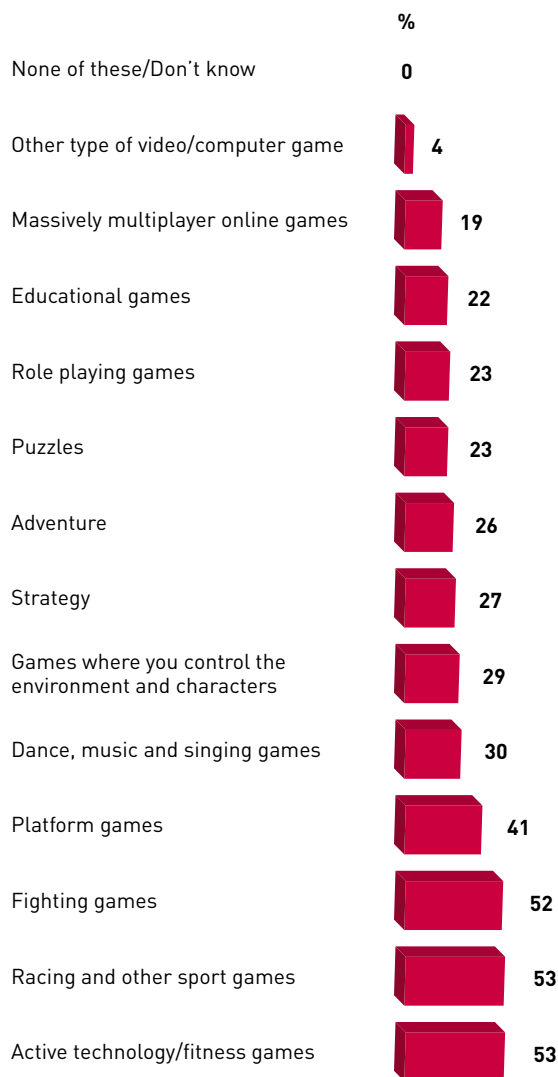
Children aged 8-10 (younger children were not asked due to their weaker cognitive ability) were asked to say whether they played a certain game type or not (see Table 3). They were more likely to play active games with their parents, as well as racing and platform games (where you have to reach the end of a course). Sports games and adventure games also featured highly.

**Table 3: Games children play with adults**



The genres that young people aged 11-15 years reported playing with adults again showed the popularity of active games and racing and sports games (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Games children aged 11-15 play with adults**



From these statistics it is clear adults were more likely to play puzzles and educational games with younger children, while they – or other adults and siblings – are more likely to play fighting games with 11-15 year-olds. Active technology and fitness games, and racing games were the most common family games, while the least popular family games were MMOGs.

Women were more likely to say they play active technology and fitness games with a child than men (54% compared to 34%). They were also more likely to play educational games (46% compared to 31%) and dance, music and singing games (34% compared to 13%). Conversely, men were more likely than women to play fighting games (24% compared to 12%) and strategy games (17% compared to 5%) with a child.

## Interview and workshop key findings

### Equipment and frequency of game playing

The ten families interviewed - who classed themselves as gaming families - had various games playing equipment<sup>19</sup>: nearly all had more than one games console. Most owned a Wii and one of the families also owned a PlayStation3 (the most up-to-date in the PlayStation console series). Two of the families who owned a Wii and a PlayStation2 also owned an Xbox (one of these families owned two Xboxes). In addition, four of the families referred to portable games players they owned such as Nintendo DSs and PlayStation Portables. In addition, a number of the families talked about laptops, desktops computers and mobile phones which were also used for playing games. Parents often stated that the Wiis had been bought with family gaming in mind. Reflecting this, nearly all of the homes with a Wii in them placed the Wii in a public space, such as a sitting room or lounge, where any member of the family could access and share them. This contrasted with other games consoles which tended to be in children's bedrooms.

In the families interviewed, new games consoles carried a novelty factor. A number of the mothers talked about the frequency of family gaming when the console, usually the Wii, was new, but over time this activity had lapsed and was now reserved mainly for family get-togethers on special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays or when the weather was particularly bad. Mothers said that they tended to play for short periods of time, fitted

between other tasks. Interestingly, this is congruent with previous literature on how women in particular fragment their television viewing whilst also looking after children and completing household duties.

### Choosing consoles and games

For gaming sessions to be fun, the families stressed the need for a shared desire to play, as young people object to playing with adults when it is clearly done out of a sense of obligation. For example, one teenage girl said that she did not like playing with her mother because she thought her mother felt obliged to do so rather than wanting to.

There was also a stated need for agreement about what to play. For a gaming session to be fun **all** family members have to agree on what is played, and ideally it should reflect family interests.

Parents and young people recommended competitive sports games, such as golf and bowling, and racing games as ideal for family gaming. In contrast, other parents and young people enjoyed games where they collaborated on the same team, such as Lego Star Wars, rather than competing against one another. Some of the mothers voiced a preference for quiz games such as the Big Brain Academy and brain training games. Often the parents expressed distaste for playing games involving fighting or shooting when they played as a family. These findings reflected the results of the survey.

The parents in the study tended to rely on suggestions from their children or friends about what console to purchase and what games to play. To a lesser extent, where parents reported budgetary issues, game choice was restricted by cost or what was on special offer. The children reported being predominantly reliant on peers for information. Families used the internet to research game costs and occasionally content. However, parents and young people in these groups reported that it was never used to research techniques for playing together, finding appropriate games, or investigating what is meant by parental controls or age ratings. This was reflected by participants in the workshop discussions.

<sup>19</sup> This was unsurprising, the 2008 Ofcom survey shows that on average 88% of 8-15 year olds of any socioeconomic background have at least one console (Ofcom (2008). Annex 3 Media Literacy Audit: Report on UK children by platform. [www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/mL\\_childrens08/cannex.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/mL_childrens08/cannex.pdf)).

### Age appropriate games and parental controls

The research highlighted that some non-gaming parents did not understand the age rating system by which games are classified, nor the purpose of content icons used to flag issues such as violence, bad language and drug references within games. For example some believed a game rated 3+ meant a 4 year-old would be able to play it. In fact, the 3+ PEGI rating signifies that the content is non-offensive for younger ages; it is not a reflection of game difficulty<sup>20</sup>. For example “Football Manager 2010” is classified a 3+ game yet is not marketed or meant for young children. Where game ratings were understood by parents, they were used to ensure children played age appropriate games: this was enforced by adults and older siblings.

From the research it was found that some parents were letting children considerably younger than the recommended age play particular games. For example, in the workshops one set of parents said that they allowed their 5 year-old son to play James Bond with an age rating of 12+. It may be that the child does not understand the impact of the violence or the sexual storyline, and simply filters these out. However, whilst not claiming that playing violent video games makes children violent, age ratings should be considered before choosing games to play.

Finally parental controls were not used by some parents interviewed and who participated in the workshops. The two reasons given were: 1) the belief that children would be able to override the restrictions set, and 2) that they were unaware that they could set such controls. In the latter case they had missed the paperwork that came with the console and so remained unaware of this capability.

### Techniques to enhance family game play

In the workshops parents were more responsive to conversations about games when they were actually playing the games with their children and children were explaining the rules to their parents. The behaviour displayed during family game play included turn taking, collaboration, and lots of laughter.

For some games, explicitly asking about problem solving strategies helps young people formalise them. For example, it may prompt them to reflect on the morality of the game they are playing, and why they keep playing. When **questioning** was trialled in the workshops it had varying levels of success. Some parents read the questions with the expectation of a “right” answer. In these cases the prompts did not lead to further discussion or clarification of what was meant and a reflection about the game, the strategies, or the morality. However, some parents did use it to find out why their children thought it was fun and how they could play better by understanding any strategies. In these cases there was more of a general discussion around the game.

Families who appeared to communicate and collaborate well were positive about the **learning together** activity and ranked it highly for usefulness and enjoyment. For instance, an older sister and her parents figured out and then explained to the younger daughter how to change the fur colour and costume of the pet. Whereas, in a different family, a mother said that the game was “stupid” and then refused to participate.

**Defined roles** encouraged all family members to participate, and children enjoyed tutoring their parents. Both competitive and collaborative games were enjoyed.

<sup>20</sup> For a full description of PEGI ratings see [www.pegi.info/en/index/id/23/](http://www.pegi.info/en/index/id/23/)

### Risks and benefits of family gaming

In addition to understanding how games are currently played by families it is important to know how they are perceived. Why do families play together? Why not? This knowledge informed the recommendations around whether or not to encourage family game play, how the game playing experience could be improved, and to highlight concerns and issues for games producers.

### Video games: reasons for playing as a family

In the survey, parents were asked to give as many reasons as they could for playing games as a family. These were then classified by the interviewer into the groups given in Table 5.

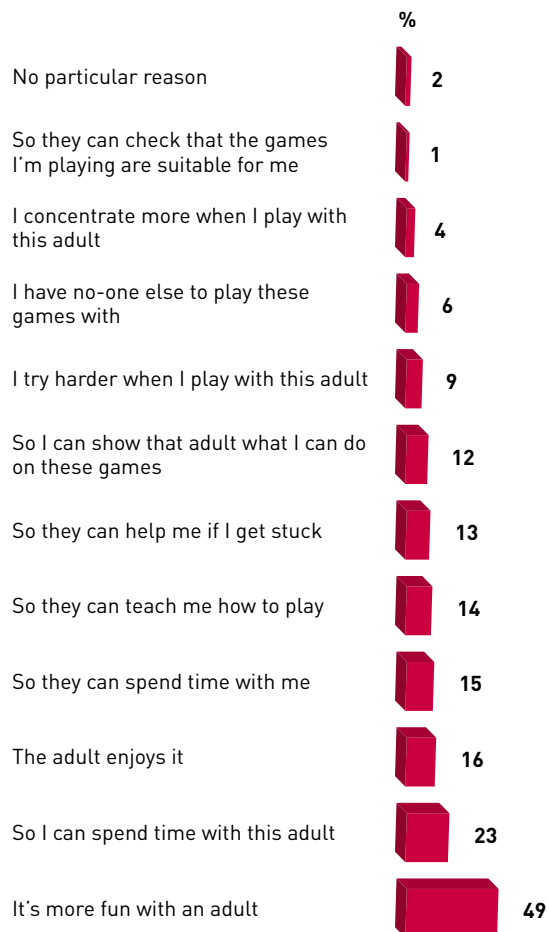
**Table 5: Reasons given by parents for playing video games with 3-15 year-olds**



Children tended to give different reasons, and again they listed their reasons which were subsequently allocated to the categories in Table 6.

In the survey, 56% and 55% of young people and adults respectively stated that they were happy with the time spent playing as a family. Adults were more likely to state that they would like to spend less time playing video/computer games with young people (19% compared to 6% of children), whereas young people were more likely to state they would like to spend more time (29% compared to 12%).

**Table 6: Reasons given by 3-15 year-olds for playing video games with adults**



Motivations for playing were explored in the interviews and responses included:

- Both parents and young people said that a good game session was fun and memorable because of how enjoyable it was. For example: “We had a New Year’s Eve party with lots of friends round and our children and we all played the Brain Training games and things like that, and that was really good fun.” Mother of three.
- Parents, in particular, said that they liked video games which provided a “level playing field” allowing children to play at a level similar to their parents, as opposed to a physical game, where parents often have an advantage due to their bigger size and greater strength. For instance, when playing golf or bowling (as a video game), neither size nor strength make a difference when competing.
- Families reported that joint activities strengthened family relationships. These could also include shopping or bicycle trips, but gaming was included as one such activity. Moreover, in one case games were seen by three girls as the activity they associated with their grandma, who actually taught them how to play, as she could no longer take part in physical activities.
- Nobody in the interviews raised the educational value of games unprompted. When this was raised by interviewers, some parents said that they believed there could be educational benefits. The predominant benefit was said to be the development of social skills - including learning to lose gracefully along with turn taking, collaboration and motor skills. Factual knowledge was mentioned less, although one mother said it helped her 5 year-old recognise larger numbers. Also she enjoyed the fact that her child was able to explain the rules of the game to her.
- There was one mention of transferring game skills. In one of the families interviewed, the 11 year-old son liked to play Ice Hockey on an Xbox with his father. He said that as he played the game offline it gave him a chance to think about the rules and tactics off the ice.

- In one family, video games were seen as providing an opportunity to engage with a usually reticent teenager.
- Children gave distinct reasons for playing, including their enjoyment at watching adults having difficulty playing and experiencing superiority in skill compared to parents: “And then, like, it’s just funny watching him tapping the buttons.” (11 year-old boy describing his father playing a first person shooter.)
- Children were also keen to play, since they often have an advantage when gaming due to their previous games playing experience. This shift in roles does not frequently occur within other family activities.

Playing video games as a family would seem to have the potential to facilitate communication and family togetherness. Parents said that they enjoyed conversations about games when they were actually playing games as a family. Moreover, one mother described how she talked with her children about computer games as a means of tackling moral issues that concerned her such as about fighting and warfare<sup>21</sup>. This example suggested that computer games can provide an opportunity to raise tricky issues in the same ways that previous research has shown television to do. Nevertheless, away from actual game playing sessions, busy parents were less enthusiastic about talking about video games. Unfortunately, they could sometimes find it boring and difficult to listen and respond to. Young people said that they could sometimes get the fathers to take an interest but otherwise they did not think video gaming was an area they could particularly engage their parents in conversation about. It would appear the playing of video games together, as a family, provides an opportunity to build joint interests between family members, which can encourage further dialogue around video games.

<sup>21</sup> This is recommended by Marc Prensky (“Don’t bother me Mom I’m learning”) and James Gee (“What video games can teach us”). Both recommend talking to ensure children are aware of morality issues and realise what they have learnt.



## Video games: reasons for not playing games as a family

From the survey data 61% of parents do not play any form of video games alone and 64% do not play games with children. The reasons for this are given in Table 7. Again the answers were unprompted and allocated to categories by the interviewers.

**Table 7: Reasons given by adults for not playing video games with 3-15 year-olds**



The importance of having time (or not) to play, was reflected by the young people interviewed. They stated adults not having time as one of the three main reasons they do not play video games with them (see Table 8). Interestingly the most commonly mentioned reason for not playing with parents was that it was more fun without an adult (28%) contrasting with the majority who, as stated previously, believed playing with an adult was more fun (49%).

**Table 8: Reasons given by 3-15 year-olds for not playing video games with adults**



The interview participants found it hard to identify reasons for not playing as a family (although this is unsurprising given that they volunteered to take part in the interviews because they played games as a family). The ideas they had for not playing as a family are listed below:

- One of the fathers voiced his frustration that his gaming skills had fallen behind those of his son: “I mean I can still beat him if I spend hours on it, but I haven't got that time.” (Father about playing racing games with his 13 year-old son.)

- Two parents said that playing video games could make them suffer a degree of motion sickness, or that the detailed graphics and busy screens were rather too intense and could bring on headaches. (“And they all take turns playing motorcross racing or race car things - it’s always vehicle related. Usually at one point I’ll have a go ... because it’s a good set-up you know, it’s got the steering wheel. And um ... but it makes me feel a bit dizzy, and it’s a good sense of laughter for everybody because I’m so rubbish at it, you know. I’ll just keep on making the same crashes you know.” (Mother of a 11 year-old boy.)
- The cost of games and consoles.
- Some parents found that games consoles could be complicated, and need to be much easier to use for irregular games players: “So it’s not technically complicated, you know you’ve got to press 16 buttons to get it right and it’s not going to happen. I mean even I find that difficult now ...” (Husband elaborating why his wife does not play.)

The issue of cost was reiterated in the workshops. One of the girls wished to have an EyePet but the family could not afford the PlayStation3 needed to play it on, and another family who were new to gaming would have liked to own a family console.

Some of these concerns could potentially be addressed by choosing different game formats, for example shorter games, casual games with more easy to use interfaces, and getting games from libraries to save on costs.

## Parental concerns

As with many electronic media, parents have a number of concerns, which were frequently raised in the interviews and workshops. These were mainly focused around issues raised when their children played as individuals. To overcome these, many of the parents interviewed had set rules around playing games. Therefore, children were required to play age appropriate games, there were often time limits for gaming sessions, and playing was dependent on completing other tasks, such as homework and household chores. Parental awareness is necessary

for making such rules. For example, in one family interviewed the parents who did not understand ratings let their 13 year-old son choose games and play without restriction.

The concerns raised were:

- **Time spent playing:** One of the mothers interviewed said that she felt playing video games in general was a waste of time.
- **Negative impact on the child’s social abilities:** There was concern around using games as an electronic babysitter in one household.
- **Negative impact on family time:** Some parents thought that there might be more enjoyable family activities to be had and that gaming could reduce the amount of time for these. For instance, one mother said that she would rather the children played outside than sat in front of the screen.
- **Internal family frustrations:** Three of the fathers feared they could not keep up with their children’s skills and therefore could only compete minimally.
- **An increase in family arguments:** One father talked of the ‘bickering’ that could occur if he played games with his son for too long and they both became frustrated.
- **Intrusion into young people’s activities:** Teenagers may require some aspect of their life to be separate from their parents – if parents wish to be involved in every gaming activity of the child this will curtail such independence.

A few of the young people were concerned about playing to the exclusion of other family activities. However, again their concerns were equally applicable to individual as well as family gaming sessions, such as getting frustrated about the game and gaming to the detriment of other activities such as homework.

It should be noted, gaming as a family offers a solution to some of the concerns raised. For example, playing video games together offers the opportunity for parents to better review and understand the games their children are playing, ensure that their children are playing age-appropriate games, moderate so that young people learn social skills such as turn taking and so on, and so that parents can mediate and explain the content of the games that their children play.

## 4. Recommendations

These recommendations have been developed through careful consideration of the findings from all phases of the project. In relation to policy, they should be viewed as guidance rather than definitive. For parents, the guidance may well be more suitable for parents who do not play games and who do not talk to their children about games, rather than for parents who already do both. It is also possible that parents in the future may not need such guidance to encourage them to play games with their children. Not only will many already be familiar with different gaming genres and structures from their own childhood experiences as gamers, but they may also recall wanting to play and share their experiences of games with their parents. Hopefully, this will motivate them both as interested players and supportive parents.

### Policy

**Recommendation:** Parents need straightforward and clear advice about where to find information about video games, both to promote family gaming potentially as a form of family learning and engagement, and to ensure that parents and children have essential safety information. A website which contains an up to date list of sites that review games along with their descriptions so that family members can find appropriate reviews would be useful.

This recommendation is based on the finding that whilst many sites currently exist that provide game reviews and advice - and a few of these are aimed at families (see for example, [www.familygamer.co.uk](http://www.familygamer.co.uk), [www.askaboutgames.com](http://www.askaboutgames.com), [www.gamepeople.co.uk/familylist\\_multi\\_recommendedfamilygames.htm](http://www.gamepeople.co.uk/familylist_multi_recommendedfamilygames.htm)) these sites may not provide the information that parents need, particularly if they are beginners. There are also few sites that provide advice on maximising enjoyment as playing as a family, for example, the ELSPA site states that parents should engage with their children's games by playing alongside them<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> This advice is given on the page:  
[www.askaboutgames.com/?c=/pages/safePlay.jsp](http://www.askaboutgames.com/?c=/pages/safePlay.jsp).

**Recommendation:** Publicise the standardised PEGI age rating and content icons. This was one of the findings from the 2008 Byron review, and the Gaming in Families project confirms how essential this is, given parents' lack of awareness. There needs to be a range of publicity methods to reach all parents - for example, flyers, newspaper and television advertisements should all form part of a campaign as well as providing a URL for further guidance.

This recommendation is based on the finding from the workshops and interviews that parents were often unaware or confused about the content icons and age ratings found on games.

**Recommendation:** Paper-based, short and snappy promotional materials should accompany any online information provided for parents. Parents do not automatically turn to the internet to research video games therefore other resources are needed in order to point parents to the website and also become known to parents through word-of-mouth.

This recommendation is based on the finding that parents said that they would not readily look for information about gaming online. They reviewed several examples of safety related information and their preference was for the brightly coloured, postcard size leaflets from which they could glean information at a glance, and which also referred them to a website for further guidance.

**Recommendation:** Advice around gaming should be published in family-orientated magazines with the URL provided to the website for parents who are looking for further guidance.

This recommendation is based on parents saying that they would not have time to read detailed official written guidance yet might engage with a friendly and chatty article.

**Recommendation:** Libraries could consider holding family gaming sessions in public spaces - these already exist in some London boroughs, for example, Enfield libraries have video games tournaments<sup>23</sup>, and sessions are being run as part of GameCity in Nottingham. The aim is to provide a relaxed environment for families to try out video games together so that they understand the kit and the game genres available and can have advice on usage. The advantage of this is that it would overcome the cost barriers and provide parents with guidance about how to play video games, both of which are currently obstacles. This initiative could build on existing facilities, for example, many libraries already hire out games and provide free internet access for the public. Games consoles could be added into the mix. In October 2009 the Internet Librarian International conference held workshops on introducing gaming into libraries<sup>24</sup>. In the US, Sweden and the Netherlands such schemes already exist<sup>25</sup>.

This recommendation is based upon the finding that the financial investment required to purchase a games console and range of games can be a barrier to playing as a family combined with the time investment needed to learn to play the games. Whilst children enjoy acting as teacher they may not always have the skills to effectively tutor, especially given the restricted time that many parents and some children have.

<sup>23</sup> [www.enfield.gov.uk/449/Spring\\_Summer%20activity%20guide.pdf](http://www.enfield.gov.uk/449/Spring_Summer%20activity%20guide.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> A Swedish librarian ran a workshop to help libraries create a gaming culture, and hold gaming events, see session W3 on [www.internet-librarian.com/2009/day.php?day=Wednesday](http://www.internet-librarian.com/2009/day.php?day=Wednesday).

<sup>25</sup> In the US Nicholson surveyed 9,200 public libraries with only 18 failing to respond. 77% of these support gaming in some way, and 82% let people play games on library computers or over the internet. With respect to console games 24% of libraries used them in formal game programs – and of these only 10% were primarily educational in purpose. Of these game programs 44% included Dance Dance Revolution and 22% Guitar Hero. (Nicholson S (2009) Go back to start: gathering baseline data about gaming in libraries, *Library Review*, Vol 58(3), pp203-214). US libraries encourage young people and families to play in libraries and staff are trained to support gamers, there is even a national day of gaming competition based in libraries - see [www.ilovelibraries.org/gaming](http://www.ilovelibraries.org/gaming).

## Parents

As this project has found, providing generic advice to parents is difficult because families vary in their degree of gaming experience, family size, ages of children and time available. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Nevertheless, there are techniques and tips which may help to facilitate further family engagement and communication around video games which may increase learning potential.

**Recommendation:** It is worth trying family gaming both for fun and to explore the potential social and educational benefits. Nevertheless, for families who do not like playing video games together, try to find other activities that can be enjoyed with children.

**Recommendation:** Choose a game together – ask friends about what games their family enjoys or visit the website (recommended in the Policy section) to get suggestions of sites that provide reviews of family games in non-technical language.

This recommendation is based on the finding that for gaming experiences to be enjoyable then all the participants need to be happy about what game is being played. Parents in the study said that they had problems finding information about games. Often they speak to friends and family for recommendations, however, there is a need for this information to be more easily accessible to them.

**Recommendation:** Games which have short turns and/or clearly defined goals are often better for inexperienced players (these can be episodic or casual games). These games allow players to pick them up and begin to use immediately rather than having to learn complex controls. Examples include sports games such as bowling and boxing and simple races.

**Recommendation:** Multi-player games where players can engage at the same time can be better for creating social interaction and atmosphere rather than playing games which rely on one character and turn taking for participants.

**Recommendation:** Keep the game playing console in a shared space so it is easy to play together and so that parents can see what their children are doing.

**Recommendation:** Children like telling parents about the games they enjoy and teaching them how to play games, so allow them to do so.

**Recommendation:** There are techniques that can help parents to enhance game play with their children depending on the game type. However they do need to be tailored according to the family and the game. These suggestions include:

- Assigning roles (this works well with level/platform games and active games) - Choose one player to act as teacher, one to act as technician. The technician can only do what the teacher says and the teacher cannot touch the controls. This is effective when children introduce a game to a previously non-gaming parent.
- Questioning (this works well with adventure, role playing and first person shooter games where decisions need to be taken of a moral nature) - Take it in turns to ask questions about the game: what's your role, why are you doing that, what's the overall aim, what are your tactics, why does this game have a certain age rating? The idea is to focus on game content rather than practicalities and make problem solving strategies explicit. A list of preset questions may not be appropriate; but the above questions could be used as a starting point for conversation. It is important to leave time for discussion, and the questions could be used after gaming to reflect back on the game.

- Collaborating and Competing (this works well with racing games and active games) - Play a certain game twice, once as a team and once against each other. Discuss which one is more fun? Why?
- Choose novel games and interfaces where all family members learn how to interact with the game simultaneously.

This recommendation is based on the understanding that there can be educational benefits to video gaming particularly when play is enhanced by discussion.

## Industry

Hardware and software manufacturers have invested in developing games aimed at the family market. Parents said that it would also help them if further advice about game play could be provided.

**Recommendation:** Display age rating and any relevant icons when loading games.

This recommendation is based on parents saying that they are not always aware of age restrictions on games. Obviously, there is guidance on the box but non-gaming parents would like this information repeated when the game is loaded.

**Recommendation:** Clearly display the average turn lengths.

Families, especially parents, have limited time, and need to know how long they will need to play in order to meaningfully engage. For example, this information should include how long each individual will have a turn - so they can schedule meals or other activities.

**Recommendation:** More information about how to play the game would be useful for parents and could be provided either on the web or with the packaging.

Non-gaming parents need explicit feedback in order to learn, for example, are they playing the game correctly? Whilst parents can learn from children and this interaction can be productive, parents said that they also needed more information about how to play the game.

**Recommendation:** Make it clear in game descriptions whether the game can be weighted enabling novices and more experienced players to have an equal gaming experience.

Although not applicable to all games, some players may appreciate the opportunity to choose to modify player properties or apply ways of modifying the game so that they can play as equal competitors. This occurs to a certain extent in games like Mario Karts where the slower player gets better enhancements. Parents also said that they liked games where parents and children could compete fairly so physical attributes were lessened, rather than games where parents or young people were clearly disadvantaged.

# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Expert Seminar

#### Overview

A panel of experts in the field of families' use of new media (including computer games) was convened for a one-day seminar to share research findings and to help shape the methodology for fieldwork and workshops activities.

#### Method

This daylong seminar was held in London in June 2009. There were ten attendees representing teachers, policy makers (DCSF), academics specialising in games (UWE, London Knowledge Lab), third sector organisations interested in the area (NIACE, Childnet), industry (ELSPA), and game ratings (BBFC) (see Table 9 for a list of attendees).

In the morning, each participant summarised their understanding of gaming in families, sharing relevant research and documents and what they would choose as a research question. The discussion then moved on to what participants would include in the questionnaire and the workshops. The seminar validated and enhanced the initial plans and ensured the project focused on appropriate questions.

#### Key findings

The expert panel had a clear consensus that the project should look at the reasons that people play, and the reasons they do not; that it should focus on where parents and children get their information and in what format; and that any research should not be limited to on- or off-line gaming, but rather be a mix of methods to ensure understanding about game play.

The questions that we proposed to address in the survey and field studies, based on the existing literature review, were corroborated by the group.

**Table 9: Attendees for expert seminar**

Alec Titterton	National Network Coordinator for Maths and Computing Colleges, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust
David Austin	British Board of Film Classification (BBFC)
Diane Carr	Lecturer: Media and Cultural Studies (interests in: subjectivity, representation, learning, computer games, gaming, film, online worlds), London Knowledge Lab
Lucinda Fell	Policy and Communications Manager, Childnet International)
Mary Ulicsak Patsy Quinn	Learning Researcher, Futurelab Programme Director, Digital Learning Team, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
Seth Giddings	Senior Lecturer: Digital Media and Critical Theory, (interests in: interactive media, videogames, culture of games and play, digital cinema), University of Western England
Simon Sauntson	Public affairs manager, Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA)
Sue Cranmer William Longhill	Senior Researcher, Futurelab Secretary for the video games safety working group, Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)



## Appendix B

### Survey method

#### Overview

For the survey, Futurelab placed 12 questions on the Ipsos MORI Capibus, a general public omnibus which interviews a nationally representative sample of around 2,000 adults aged 15 or older, face-to-face in their homes each week, using CAPI technology (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). Only those who were parents or legal guardians of children aged under 16 years old were asked the gaming survey questions. In total, a representative sample of 558 parents or legal guardians (aged 15 and over) was interviewed throughout Great Britain between 21 August and 27 August 2009. Data were weighted to the known population profile of adults in Great Britain.

All of the adults interviewed are the parents or the legal guardians of a child/children under the age of 16, and almost all (97%) of the adults live with their child/children. A very small minority of respondents have a child/children who does not/do not live with them and to whose upbringing they contribute financially (3%) and just 1% have a child/children who does not/do not live with them and to whose upbringing they do not contribute financially.

In addition, Futurelab placed nine questions on the August wave of the LVQ Research dedicated children's omnibus. In total, a representative sample of 737 children aged 5-15 was interviewed between 13 August and 20 August 2009. Data were weighted to Government Office Region based on national statistics, and to enable equal proportions in each age year/gender category.

Similar questions were asked of both the adults and children, however, where wording had to be adapted to account for likely differences in cognitive ability, direct comparisons between parent and child data were not possible. Moreover, there were two versions of the children's questionnaire; one for children aged 5-10 and another for young people aged 11-15.

The full findings are in the report 'Parents' and children's views on and experiences of gaming - survey analysis'.

[www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project\\_reports/becta/Gaming\\_in\\_Families\\_survey\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project_reports/becta/Gaming_in_Families_survey_analysis.pdf)

## Appendix C

### Fieldwork

#### Overview

The interview questions were based on the issues and suggestions arising from the literature review, expert seminar and MORI questionnaire results. The purpose was to:

- elaborate issues that came up either through the literature review and the questionnaire, for example, around the frequency of gaming and why particular games were chosen
- identify the most appropriate format in which to present information to families
- help structure workshop activities (were there any issues about learning games for example that the family struggled with, were there any key hints and tips for how to overcome this that could have been tried out with other families, were there any games that would be a good starting point for family gaming)
- identify current practices to inform advice, for example, how much need was there to publicise the risks and benefits of games, set up parental controls, have a list of family friendly games, guidance on how long to play.

#### Method

We advertised for families to participate through nationwide organisations such as the Fatherhood Institute, NIACE, and Futurelab’s network of local schools and contacts. Participants were offered £25 and the interviews were held when convenient to them.

This resulted in a sample of self-selecting participants based in the south west in a range of urban and rural settings. The families were of different sizes and included a spread of children of different ages (see Table 10).

Parents and children were interviewed separately using a semi structured interview schedule. All the interviews were recorded. They were also asked to keep a games diary for three weeks after the interview recording their

activities. The data was then analysed around themes based on the questions that were asked and other issues that parents and children raised for themselves.

**Table 10: Interview participants**

Parents	Children
1 Mother	Son (5)
2 Both parents	Son (11)
3 Both parents	Daughter (16) Daughter (14) Son (7) Son (5)
4 Both parents	Daughter (7) Son (5)
5 Both parents	Son (15) Daughter (8)
6 Both parents	Son (14) Daughter (10) Son (8)
7 Both parents	Son (14) Son (12) Son (9)
8 Both parents	Son (13) Son (9)
9 Mother	Son (13) Daughter (11)
10 Both parents	Daughter (18) Daughter (15) Daughter (13)

#### Summary<sup>26</sup>

The homes we visited were well kitted out in terms of games playing equipment: nearly all had more than one games console. Most owned a Wii and one of the families also owned a PlayStation3 (the most up-to-date in the PlayStation console series). Two of the families who owned a Wii and a PlayStation2 also owned an Xbox (one of these families owned two Xboxes). In addition, four of the families referred to portable games players they owned such as Nintendo DSs and PlayStation Portables. In addition, a number of the families talked about laptops, desktops computers and mobile phones which were also used for playing games some of the time. We were told by parents that the Wiis had often been bought with family gaming in mind.

Most families who owned a Wii said that the Wii was their favourite games console for playing games as a family. Reflecting this, nearly all of the homes with a Wii in them placed the Wii in a public space such as a sitting room or lounge where any member of the family could access and share them. This contrasted with other games consoles which tended to be in children’s bedrooms.

<sup>26</sup> This is the full report – excerpts from this section are also provided in section 3.

From the interviews popular games for playing in were said sports games such as golf and bowling; and racing games. Some of the mothers voiced a preference for quiz games such as the Big Brain Academy and brain training games. Often the parents expressed distaste for playing games involving fighting or shooting when they played as a family. Indeed, some parents and their children talked about enjoying games where they could collaborate on the same team within a game, such as in Lego Star Wars, rather than competing against one another.

The frequency and length of family gaming sessions varied immensely between the families interviewed. In one family, a lone mother with a young child said that she tried to play with her son three out of seven days of the week, sometimes making an 'easy' evening meal to make time to play. Other mothers talked about the limits to their time given household responsibilities often combined with a lack of motivation to play video games. A number of the mothers talked about how family gaming on the Wii had been a novelty at first, but that over time this activity had lapsed and was now reserved mainly for family get-togethers on special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays or when the weather was particularly bad. One of the mothers said that she felt her son already played too many games and she did not want to encourage further time spent in front of the screen. Compared with mothers, in some families, it seemed that fathers were either more motivated to play video games with their children and/or had more time to do so. However, many of the children and young people described how they played on their own or with their siblings more often than they played with their parents. In one family, two teenagers said they had tried to get their parents to play but had failed. Nevertheless, they played frequently with their grandma. The children's accounts reflected their parents' in the suggestion that children played more often with fathers than mothers. However, exceptionally, in one family, the father appeared uninterested whilst the mother was a keen Big Brain Academy player and played this frequently with her three children.

The parents interviewed regulated their children's games playing. They enforced time limits, particularly if their children became frustrated and grumpy or if homework, musical instruments and small animals were

being neglected. Parents also said that they negotiated between children to ensure fairness and turn taking. When asked, children illustrated examples of these rules, concurring with their parents on many of these. The risks of playing computer games that parents described were mainly banal, associated with playing too long, becoming frustrated, and looking at the screen for too long.

The families interviewed came up with some extremely helpful dos and don'ts for successful family gaming. Parents said that it was important to get games which are geared to children's ages, not just to avoid risk but also to ensure that children can negotiate the complexity of the game and are approaching the level of skill needed. Some parents said that it was important to get easy-to-use controls. Others said games should be in line with pre-existing interests and hobbies. Many of the parents said that gaming in families could be fun and was worth trying. On the downside, one of the mothers said that parents needed to be careful that games are not used as an electronic babysitter. Children made some similar points to those of their parents. They said that playing video games in families could be fun and the parents who do not play with their children should try it! It was a particularly good pastime in bad weather or when children were bored. And again, that it was important to find games that everyone shared an interest in.

Learning was not said by parents to be an important factor in children's and young people's games playing. Whereas studies show that many parents provide a computer with internet for their children convinced of the educational value, gaming equipment is mainly provided by parents for entertainment purposes only. Nevertheless, some parents talked about incidental learning gains that their children experienced. For example, the mother of a five-year-old child said that she thought games such as Lego Batman had taught her child to handle large numbers. Other parents talked about how video games could have potential educational value. Nevertheless, they were vague about how games might actually enhance their children's learning beyond helping them to develop ICT skills and confidence more generally. Some parents were more convinced of the educational value of games which were labelled as educational such as, Learning Ladder and to an extent, brain training games. Likewise,

whilst most children spoke little about the potentially educational value of games, some teenagers thought brain training games helped develop their maths and literacy skills.

Playing video games as a family would seem to have the potential to facilitate communication and family togetherness. Parents said that they did enjoy conversations about games when they were actually playing games with their children particularly when children were explaining the rules of the game to their parents. Moreover, one mother talked about how she talked with her children about computer games as a means of tackling moral issues that concerned her such as about fighting and warfare. This example suggested that computer games can provide an opportunity to raise important issues in the same ways that previous research has shown television to do. Nevertheless, away from actual game playing sessions, busy parents were less enthusiastic about talking about video games. Unfortunately, they said they sometimes found it boring and difficult to listen and respond to. Children and young people said that they could sometimes get fathers to take an interest but otherwise they did not think video gaming was an area they could particularly engage their parents in conversation about. Hopefully, the playing of video games together, as a family, is able to provide an opportunity to build joint interests between family members which can therefore encourage further dialogue around video games.

## Appendix D

### Workshops

#### Overview

The three workshops were arranged in order to test out ideas for family focused activities drawn from the findings of the previous stages of the project, and to develop creative ideas for parental guidance on computer gaming.

#### Participants

The participants were a self-selecting group of 11 families: five with one child, five with two children and one with three. Five of the families had boys, and only one of these had only boys (and he was an only child). Six of the families had only girls; all bar one had their daughters in upper primary. The final four families had a mix of boys and girls (see Table 11). Two of the families had step-parents and the one with three children was a single father.

**Table 11: Family composition**

Adult attendance	Children		
1 Both parents	Son (13)	Daughter (10)	
2 Father	Son (13)	Daughter (12)	
3 Both parents	Daughter (13)	Son (12)	
4 Both parents	Daughter (9)	Daughter (7)	
5 Both parents	Daughter (8)		
6 Both parents	Daughter (9)		
7 Step-father	Daughter (8)		
8 Both parents	Daughter (14)	Daughter (5)	
9 Mother <sup>27</sup>	Daughter (8)		
10 Both parents	Son (7)		
11 Father (single parent)	Son (16)	Son (10)	Daughter (8)

The families were individually asked to complete a short questionnaire about their game preferences and that of one parent or child as appropriate. Responses suggested that the children liked similar games to those of respondents in the survey. For example, the favourite games of the four boys were football, Halo or Call of Duty. The seven fathers preferred Eve Online (MMOG science fiction world), football, racing, Call of Duty and Guitar

<sup>27</sup> The step-father and baby step brother did not attend.

Hero. Of the eleven girls one liked Build a Bear, one liked Wii Fit, one Wii Pokemon, two Mario Kart, one Mario Super Bros, one Singstar, one Tomb Raider, one Kung Fu panda, one Farmville and one all of them. Finally of the five mothers, one liked Scrabble, two Mario games, one Everquest and one Hidden Objects on the DS. This reflects the survey where males tended to prefer sports and first person shooter games, while females are more into active games and possibly puzzles.

Families were offered £50 for participating and the workshops were held in a secondary school or Futurelab.

#### Method

The workshops were divided into two sections. In the first section, parents and children reviewed in their age groups existing information sources around games; they were questioned on their appropriateness and what they would like to see.

Both viewed:

- Microsoft video – the one viewed involved a father and son discussing how they regulated the son's game play ([www.getgamesmart.com/spotlight/ambassadors](http://www.getgamesmart.com/spotlight/ambassadors)).
- Gamesmart postcard (p15 on the Byron summary for young people - [www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/A%20Summary%20for%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/A%20Summary%20for%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20FINAL.pdf)).

Adults viewed:

- Family gamer – which is a non-commercial site containing game reviews and details about genres and consoles for non-gamers ([www.familygamer.co.uk](http://www.familygamer.co.uk)).
- Hard copy of Ofcom Parental controls flyer ([www.ofcom.org.uk/files/2009/09/consoles.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/files/2009/09/consoles.pdf)).
- PEGI ratings leaflet – professional summary of age ratings and icons on a one sheet folded flyer.

Children viewed:

- The kidsmart website which has advice about age ratings and staying safe ([www.kidsmart.org.uk/games](http://www.kidsmart.org.uk/games))
- Internet safety carol. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=te7KLgosqsg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=te7KLgosqsg))

Questions were provided for parents and young people to aid the review process.

In the second section, families played four different game genres on four different consoles, and trialled different techniques related to each game: questioning, role-taking, competing vs collaborating and learning together. This activity was designed to review these techniques which aimed to improve the enjoyment and ‘usefulness’ of family gaming for example, the levels of understanding and acknowledging or practising the skills acquired trialled in the workshops. Families also completed a game questionnaire prior to playing to help stimulate thinking and discussion on the topic. The techniques themselves were based on previous research, which included literature around how to enhance watching television and play board games. The families assessed each technique; the adults provided feedback around fun and usefulness, while the children categorised each technique according to the amount of fun had. There was an opportunity to comment.

Briefly, the five techniques trialled by the eleven families were:

#### **Game questionnaire**

This was based on the GameSmart questionnaire (see [www.getgamesmart.com/tools/gamerquiz](http://www.getgamesmart.com/tools/gamerquiz)). This was a starting point for adults and children to discuss game play.

#### **Questioning**

This was done with Lego Batman. The family had two Xbox controllers and were asked to play together. After about five minutes they were asked to discuss questions such as their character role in the game and the aim of the game. The aim was to promote discussion about motivation and reflection on consequences which is especially applicable to first person shooters, horror and puzzle solving games where there may be moral issues.

#### **Defined roles**

In this activity we asked the family to choose one “teacher” and one “technician” as well as players. The “teacher” had to instruct the “technician” how to open Wii Fit hula hooping. The players were then asked to choose a Mii if necessary, as well as keep score if required. This was to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to learn how to set up the game, and help develop skills such as giving, and receiving, instruction. In the majority of cases children took the role of teacher and enjoyed telling their parents what to do.

#### **Learning together**

The families were given the EyePet to groom and feed on a PlayStation 3. This game has a novel interface and the family were asked to figure out how to interact with the pet together (which is tricky given the three dimensional nature of the experience). This was new to all participants.

#### **Competition and collaboration**

Mario Karts was set up on two linked Nintendo DS consoles. In one race the players had to beat each other, in the second they were on the same team. Competition had been a key motivator for family gaming in the field studies. Winning was important (although there were examples of the benefits of being on the same side). By trying both, the families could find out what they prefer.

## Findings

From the first activity parents liked the size of the Gamesmart postcard, it was suitable for “going on the fridge”; although they would like a URL to be added. They liked the glossy PEGI ratings flyer; the mix of pictures and short descriptions was good although the size precluded display in the kitchen. The Ofcom Parental Controls flyer was too “wordy” and finding information in it was hard, though parents found the reference to parental controls useful. The website was too complex to navigate around, although the less experienced gaming parents liked the fact that there were reviews that described not only the game but who it was suitable for. Finally, although they thought television advertisements were a good way of reaching people they felt that being told to set a timer for game play was too dictatorial, information should contain recommendations rather than instructions.

The children felt the Gamesmart postcard would be more useful for adults – and it should be linked to a website. The video was approved of as it involved real people, and focused on the family not just the Xbox. An acknowledgement of children’s activities other than games was seen as important by the young people in all the workshops.

The children liked the videos incorporated into the Kidsmart website – although they felt there were a bit short and more information could have been presented this way. They would have liked demonstrations of games, some online games, and links to family gaming websites. The internet carol was the least memorable, although the children were aware of safety issues from school activities.

From the surrounding discussions parents tended to use the internet in limited ways to find out about games. They might look at game reviews, check costs, order games, but did not report using sites that focus on family appropriate games. Some parents did not look for these at all, as they rely on recommendations from friends and their children. However, there appears to be some need for clear advice for non-gamers. They wanted information around who would enjoy the game, how long each episode (or turn) lasts, what kind of experience is needed and so forth. A brief description of the key findings for each of the activities is given below.

## Game questionnaire

This was received positively, no adult or young person from the first session thought it was boring and only one child from the last two workshops. They did learn things about each other. Only four parents knew their child’s favourite book – yet six out of the seven dads and two out of the five mothers got their child’s favourite game right. This suggests that discussions outside of a gaming environment would be useful.

## Questioning

Interestingly, adults found questioning the least enjoyable technique and not so useful; although it was voted the most popular technique by the younger participants.

## Defined roles

Parents found this the most fun and useful activity and it was their overall favourite activity. Children also enjoyed it and stated it was fun.

However, there were issues if all members could already use the software. Parents were observed setting up the Wii without waiting for the appropriate instruction. This activity also demonstrated how enjoyable competition could be: all family members declared an aim to beat at least one named member of their family.

## Learning together

What was clear was the relationship within the family was key to the success of this technique. Families that were used to discussions and helping each other did well, those that were not quite often just observed.

The EyePet was the favourite activity of the children (the group had lots of Key Stage 2 girls to whom the game had particular appeal). However, it was only fractionally more fun and useful in the eyes of the adults than questioning.

### **Competition and collaboration**

Adults found the technique fun and useful, children also felt it was fun. However, it was the least popular choice by children when assessing the activities at the end. This may be as a result of frustration as adults seemed less confident using the DS controls.

What is clear from the practical activities is that the usefulness and enjoyment of each technique depends on the game, family, and previous experience. Each has to be tailored to the game and the family – there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach.



## About Futurelab

Futurelab is an independent not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to transforming teaching and learning, making it more relevant and engaging to 21st century learners through the use of innovative practice and technology. We have a long track record of researching and demonstrating innovative uses of technology and aim to support systemic change in education – and we are uniquely placed to bring together those with an interest in improving education from the policy, industry, research and practice communities to do this. Futurelab cannot do this work on its own. We rely on funding and partners from across the education community – policy, practice, local government, research and industry - to realise the full potential of our ideas, and so continue to create systemic change in education to benefit all learners.

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