



Cybercitizenship: Important Issues for Citizens of the Online Community

This is the first article to appear in a three-part series by Dr. Kathy Revelle, Librarian, Griffith Library, on the important issues that we as a community are faced with in the 21st Century.

Technology, in the form of laptop computers, cell phones, ipods, etc. is a natural part of early 21st century life; as unremarkable as vinyl music recordings and television sets were when I was in high school. (Now, color television - that was something new and exciting!) Since 2005, I have watched with awe, and participated enthusiastically, as RIS/RIST teachers and students have employed technology to enrich and extend the educational experience on this campus. There are, however, some issues related to the online world being created by and for today's young people that we all should consider. In this newsletter issue and in the two to follow, I will highlight for the students and parents of the RIS/RIST community some research-based information concerning what many young adults worldwide are doing online, and what problems or risks might be involved.

Part One: Online Gaming



Let's begin by looking at the MMORPG phenomenon: Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games. Concerns about computer gaming center on two broad issues: 1) violence and sexual content in the games, and 2) time devoted to playing. There can be no doubt that both the amount and degree of violent content in computer-based games have increased greatly over the past few years. Violent games are more popular and they sell better. Topping the violence spectrum is Manhunt 2. The player becomes a character in the Manhunt 2 story, using a motion-sensitive remote to control a virtual weapon and commit multiple grizzly murders. Grand Theft Auto 4 is another extremely violent game, featuring casual violence, drug dealing and prostitution. The player kills people and steals cars to earn points. This game is no longer legal in Thailand, following the murder of a taxi driver by a young man who crossed the line between gaming and reality.

Our students seem not to favor the most violent games. Last year, many RIS students were playing World of Warcraft II, an intense fantasy game with worldwide popularity. This year I see many students playing Counter Strike, a game which pits a team of counter-terrorists against a team of terrorists in a series of rounds. Each round is won by either completing the mission objective or eliminating the opposing force.

Is there conclusive evidence that MMORPG playing results in increased real-life violence or aggression for the average teen player? No. On rare occasions, World of Warcraft II has moved players to actual violence.

(One death resulted in Russia.) The same is true for other games. We do know that some school shooters (including the infamous ones in Columbine) had been avid MMORPG players. Certainly, the vast majority of players do NOT act out in violent ways. Extremely violent games are fairly new, and thus careful, longitudinal studies have yet to be completed. The evidence we do have, suggests that playing a violent game has a short-term physiological effect on many players; an effect that does not carry over into their offline lives. The possibility of a stronger link between MMORPG playing and real-life violence, for individuals who already have violent tendencies, seems possible.

Should parents, teachers and teens themselves be concerned about ADDICTION to online gaming? Perhaps. There is no magic number of hours spent playing per day or per week that signals a serious problem. Addiction is defined in terms of 1) How reluctant the player is to suspend play, and 2) The effects online gaming seems to be having on the player's offline relationships and activities. Each individual and his or her family will need to judge. Not too long ago, I overheard one RIS student say to a friend, "Well my dad said I had to do my homework first, so I finished my homework about 10:30 pm and played until 5:00 am." This student had chosen to face a full day of school after a night with no sleep. Clearly this might signal a problem.

The one consistent finding of all studies I read was that school grades dropped as the number of hours spent gaming increased. Each student and his or her family should consider what effect gaming might be having on a student's school achievement. One simple curb on all-night gaming is for the parent to insist that the laptop, mobile phone and MP3 player be plugged in for recharging, outside the student's room, every night.

Let me emphasize that playing computer games is not basically unhealthy or unwise. This activity can be a normal part of social life for today's young adults. I merely urge our students to avoid games with extreme levels of realistic violence, and to limit their playing hours sensibly. Likewise, I urge RIS/RIST parents to engage in discussion with their teens about the content of the games they are playing and how many hours they devote to gaming. As with so many other aspects of life, it is your job to guide them in making wise decisions.

Future issues of this newsletter will include articles on: Online Social Networking and Cyberbullying.