

IT'S JUST A GAME – OR IS IT? 1:38:20

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NARRATOR

About 17 million teenagers age 12-17 use the Internet daily.

MICHAEL

I think the Internet plays a really big part in my life just for all spectrums.

COURTNEY

I can spend from like five to seven hours on weekends but usually like one or two.

NARRATOR

Online gaming is a virtual environment that is redefining how kids socialize and explore their surroundings. It often becomes the place to get away from the watchful eyes of parents and hang out with friends.

At any given time, millions of teenagers from around the world are connected via the Internet to MMO's – massively multiplayer online worlds like World of Warcraft, Runescape, Guild Wars and Habbo Hotel.

In these virtual environments kids can be invisible, often creating new identities and alter egos – usually bigger than life. It's a world where kids can be invisible, immortal and brave.

And, it's not just teenagers who are there for the gaming. There are also millions of online gamers over 18 years old.

LEVI

The aspect that I really enjoy is strategizing with my friends and building the tactics that we need to overcome these dungeon scenarios. When you get on and game online at my online parties, you actually get to interact with people and it actually fulfills like a social void inside a lot of people including me. So that's a big reason that I like gaming.

MELISSA

Gaming is fun because it's a great way to unwind at the end of the day. Get together with your friends and be together and think up strategies.

NARRATOR

Kids tell their parents it's just a game, but is it? How safe is this virtual world? Here is an example of what could happen when online chat gets too personal.

Tiffany loves to play an online game called Runescape and logs on just about everyday after school. She logs in under the screen name Tiffanonly.

Tiffany talks with a lot of friends while playing the game. Some she knows better than others. About a month ago a fellow gamer met Tiffany online and they became friends logging on about the same time everyday. At first they mostly talked about the game, but one day Tiffany logged on at a later time than usual.

With that, Tiffany's new friend can find out just about everything he needs to know about Tiffanonly. Here's how he does it.

First, Rockman logs onto his fake MySpace account to check whether or not Tiffany is also on MySpace. Rockman begins his search by clicking on "Find a Friend" and entering the names Tiffany and Tiffanonly. Success. This could be the same Tiffanonly he met on Runescape so he continues to search for more information by reading the profile she created about herself.

Unfortunately for Rockman, Tiffanonly's MySpace profile is set to "private" meaning that new friends have to be invited into her circle of friends, but now he knows she lives in Salt Lake City and is 15 years old. Rockman asks to be invited in as a friend but Tiffany only accepts friend requests from people she knows. Rockman does not know her last name or email address.

Rockman tries again, only this time he has to be creative. He knows that Josh, another Runescape player, is a good friend of Tiffanonly. Josh is already on Rockman's list of friends so he goes in through Josh's MySpace site to see if Tiffanonly is on Josh's friend list. She is and now because they are both on Josh's friends list, Rockman is to be trusted and accepted into Tiffany's circle of friends.

Rockman can now check out her complete profile and look at her pictures. In her MySpace profile, Tiffany lists that among other things, she plays lacrosse. She even posted some photos from her lacrosse games.

Rockman then does a search to identify schools in Salt Lake City with a lacrosse team known as the West Orange Warriors. He finds a match – West Orange High School - The school address, class and lunch, schedules and the roster of upcoming lacrosse games. He finds that on the following Friday the Warrior Lacrosse Team is scheduled to play at 7:00. And it is a home game. Rockman's next step is to do a map search to see where West Orange High School is located Now Rockman has just about everything he need to know about Tiffany except where she lives.

In less than 15 minutes Tiffany's personal information is an open book to potential online predators like Rockman. What started in an online game with innocent conversation between friends has now become a very dangerous situation.

On Friday, Rockman attends the game in hopes of seeing if the real Tiffanonly matches her MySpace photos – including the one in her lacrosse team jersey.

Rockman has been very successful in finding Tiffanonly – and why? Because she casually mentioned she played lacrosse with the West Orange Warriors and she lived in Utah. All Rockman needs now is to follow her home from the game to find out where she lives.

What should Tiffany have done to prevent this from happening?

Looking back, perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to share so much information about her lacrosse team – although it started out very innocently.

At that point, Rockman decided to take it one step further. How should Tiffany have answered Rockman's questions?

Tiffany should not have told him that she lives in Utah even though it's a pretty big state and a seemingly inconsequential answer. This is where the potential trouble began. Now Rockman knows that Tiffany lives in Utah and plays on a lacrosse team called the Warriors.

This is another bad choice on Tiffany's part. Now Rockman also knows that Tiffany's parents probably come home from work in the early evening and Tiffany is most likely alone until then.

A better choice for Tiffany to respond to Rockman would look like this.

As for Tiffany's MySpace profile, posting photos of herself and her lacrosse team was not a good idea. That, along with posting her photo, her age and the fact that she lives in Salt Lake City makes her a potential target to be groomed by an Internet predator.

Take the time to think about it what you are doing. How safe are you when you are talking or playing online?

For more information go to netsafeutah.org

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