



## Connecting Parents with Online-Enabled Video Games

By Patricia E. Vance

Keeping pace with all the ways that media in our homes are changing can be a daunting proposition for many parents, especially given the significant impact the Internet has had on our children's lives. MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter...the list goes on and on, and the way our children play video games is no exception.

According to a recent survey commissioned by Entertainment Software Rating Board ([ESRB](#)), one-third of parents said they were aware that their children play video games online, which is an increase of nearly 20% since 2007. It's easy to understand the attraction. By harnessing the power of the Internet, gamers are able to connect with others playing the same game which can enhance the fun factor and competitive aspect of playing games while also creating a sense of community. But given the risks inherent to life in the digital age, it's imperative that parents be aware of some of the potential risks that come along with video games played online, as well as the tools and controls at their disposal to help them mitigate those risks. The following is a basic guide to what every parent needs to know about the video games their kids are playing online.

### **Online-Enabled Games**

[ESRB ratings](#) provide parents with general guidance about content and age-appropriateness, but online-enabled elements like communication and the behavior of other players is not something that can be considered or reflected in a game's rating. Many online-enabled games allow for content created or introduced by other players (called "user-generated content"). Things like voice, text and video chat, new appearances and outfits on characters or different environments in which the game is played are all types of user-generated content that can be shared with other players online. Games that allow user-generated content carry a notice on the package that reads "Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB," which warns parents that the user-generated content in the game may not be in line with the rating assigned.

### **Parental Controls**

Just like a standard PC, every current generation console ([Xbox 360™](#), [Wii™](#) and [PLAYSTATION®3](#)) has the ability to connect players online. While all these offer parental control features, they can differ from one system to the next in terms of what elements can be controlled and to what degree. Some parental controls allow parents to restrict games by ESRB rating and turn online connectivity on and off, while others can do even more like control when, how and with whom the system can be used to play with others online. Consult [this guide](#) for step-by-step instructions on setting up parental controls for your game system.

### **MMOs**

Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games are exactly what they sound like – games that allow a large number of players to play the same game at the same time over an Internet connection. Games like *World of Warcraft* (which boasts more than 11 million subscribers worldwide) are purchased at the store and players then pay a monthly subscription fee to play with others. Just like online-enabled games, these kinds of games can include significant amounts of user-generated content that isn't part of the rating. They can also be extremely engrossing for players as they oftentimes involve a social component, with players assembling into groups, such as clans or guilds, to cooperate within the game.

## **DLC and Micro-transactions**

Downloadable content (DLC for short) is any content that can be downloaded and added into a game to extend or alter it from that which was purchased. DLC can be as simple as a new outfit for a game character or as elaborate as adding an entirely new 10-hour adventure onto an existing game, with myriad options in between. Publishers typically charge for DLC and the prices vary depending on what the content is.

A micro-transaction is a purchase that might provide or unlock something that makes a cosmetic change (like a new hat or pair of shoes for the player's character, for example), or gives players something they could have attained or unlocked through effort (like new powers and abilities or a new level to play). Micro-transactions are found most often in free-to-play online games (since that's usually how they make money) but are available for all kinds of games.

Consoles like the Xbox 360, PLAYSTATION 3 and Wii offer virtual storefronts and some games even allow the player to purchase additional content from within the game itself. Purchasing content can be done using a credit card, gift cards available at many retailers, and some online retailers like Amazon.com even offer the ability to purchase downloadable games for the consoles through their websites.

## **Tips for Parents**

- Check a game's [ESRB rating](#) before bringing it home, but bear in mind that the rating doesn't reflect user-generated content encountered during online play.
- Go beyond the rating. Read [rating summaries](#) that provide a brief yet descriptive explanation of content in a game that factored into its rating. The ESRB's free [ParentTools newsletter](#) offers rating summaries in a customized list of the most recently rated game titles.
- [Check game review sites](#) for even more detail about game content.
- Use [parental controls](#) which are available for all new game consoles.
- Monitor and/or play games with your children. There's absolutely no substitute for being an involved parent.
- Keep the console in a public area of the house rather than in the child's bedroom. This will help you keep an eye and ear on the action.
- Talk to your children about the inherent risks of online gameplay. Use the ESRB's [Family Discussion Guide](#) to help structure a conversation.
- As with all things, exercise moderation. It's important that kids balance video games with other facets of their lives, including school work and social activities.



*Patricia Vance is president of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a nonprofit organization that assigns age and content ratings for computer and video games. She is an interactive media expert and mother of two. For more information visit [www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org).*

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