Focus On…Digging into Minecraft
- information for Parents and Carers

Minecraft is a hugely popular 'virtual world' game amongst children of all ages and abilities. Often described to the unfamiliar as 'virtual-lego', it provides a 'sandbox' platform for creative expression through in-built characters including animals and monsters and the building of virtual environments. Players can play individually or in multiplayer environments, construct items such as buildings, create towns and dig (mine) fo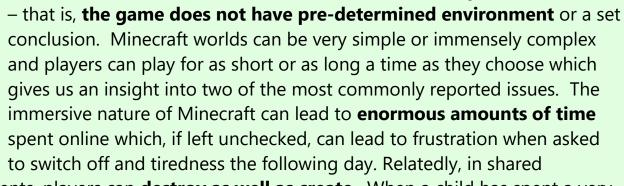r materials with different properties which can be used to 'craft' items such as tools - if you have not previously seen Minecraft, take a look at the Minecraft trailer video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmB9b5njVbA) to get an idea of what is involved.

To suggest Minecraft is a popular game is something of an understatement – almost any child will be familiar with the game which first appeared around 6 years ago and according to reports, is the **2nd best-selling video game of all time**. Minecraft was bought from its original creators (Mojang) by Microsoft in 2014 and has a number of versions with a variety of different modes such as Creative, Adventure and Survival modes, growing in popularity ever since (an Education version of Minecraft was released in 2016).

Minecraft is age-rated by PEGI as 7+ and unlike many other popular video games, part of its enduring popularity over the last 6 years is no doubt helped by its ability to engage with children's own creative talents and that **it has an open-ended basis** – that is, **the game does not have pre-determined environment** or a set conclusion. Minecraft worlds can be very simple or immensely complex and players can play for as short or as long a time as they choose which gives us an insight into two of the most commonly reported issues. The immersive nature of Minecraft can lead to **enormous amounts of time** spent online which, if left unchecked, can lead to frustration when asked to switch off and tiredness the following day. Relatedly, in shared environments, players can **destroy as well as create**. When a child has spent a very considerable amount of time and effort over a number of hours, days or weeks building their world only to find that someone has subsequently destroyed it (known as '**Griefing**') can feel devastating and has been linked to cases of online bullying.

In addition, the nature of being able to enter into a multiplayer environment brings potential issues of **communicating online with people they don't know**. However, playing on Minecraft does not have to be with others and using the single player **Creative mode is typically the safest option**, allowing players to become familiar with the game without monsters or other players involved. A point often raised by children (and their parents/carers) in relation to Minecraft is emulation – there are various 'YouTubers' or 'Vloggers' who record their own exploits and post them online for others to see. These online celebrities can attract enormous numbers of followers and **children will often emulate** what they do and try to create similar constructions, typically at the same time as playing the game themselves.

So, what can we do as Parents and Carers? As highlighted above, agreeing some ground rules, particularly around time limits and what is / isn't appropriate behaviour, is a good start. Having '**the online safety conversation**' may seem awkward at times but Minecraft is often a useful place to begin and can allow us to begin to talk to our children about some of the possible online risks such as online strangers, bullying and **who they need to tell if something worries them**. These topics can often be easier to introduce when combined with asking our children to teach us about their Minecraft world such as asking who the different characters are (e.g. "*is that another player?*", "*do you know them in real life?*"). The NSPCC and O$_2$ have teamed up to produce some useful information around playing Minecraft safely which can be found in the dedicated Parents & Carers section of the LSCB Online Safeguarding website (see: www.lancashiresafeguarding.org.uk/online-safeguarding). The site also contains a variety of other useful news and information about online issues including links to the **highly recommended NSPCC/O$_2$ NetAware resource** where you can find out more information about the different Social Networks and popular apps that children use.

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* and just in case you were wondering, the No.1 best-selling video game is another building block game...Tetris !