Digital Schoolhouse launch event brings experts and children together to discuss online safety

Digital Schoolhouse, the non-profit programme delivered by Ukie, the trade body for the UK's games and interactive entertainment industry, yesterday launched its 2018-2019 initiative to help primary schools across the country deliver an enriched computing curriculum.

The Digital Schoolhouse programme helped over 15,000 pupils in its previous year, a number now expected to rise to over 18,000 with more schools joining the initiative. The launch event brought expert views from industry bodies, policy makers and schools to an audience of educators, with panel debates examining online safety and the role that industry bodies, schools and parents could play in helping young people stay safe online. A wide-ranging online safety report with views from over 2000 pupils was also launched at the event, offering a detailed national picture of the issues that face the next digital generation.

The first of the two debates saw representatives from SEGA, Childnet International and the VSC Ratings Board joined by Langley Grammar School's headteacher and the editor of Ask About Games. Chaired by the Guardian's games editor, Keza MacDonald, the debate examined the issues of online safety for young people and discussed how to make sure young people have the tools and knowledge to keep themselves safe in a rapidly changing online landscape.

The panel discussion also debated whether online safety education needs to be more service based; it was acknowledged that risks associated with social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram differed to those presented by popular games such as Fortnite. All panellists agreed that helping young people navigate existing platforms safely while also building the necessary knowledge to keep themselves, their data and their content secure across all platforms, current and emerging, is crucial.

Games industry advancements such as emerging artificial intelligence technology to distinguish between comments made as part of a normal exchange and those made

with the intention of harm or abuse were cited as positive steps. However, parents' lack of knowledge was recognised as a key issue, which was backed up by the report on pupils' online safety views. This led to a call for clearer information to be made readily available to parents and for coordinating guidance in order to amplify its effect.

Shahneila Saeed, Director of Digital Schoolhouse said: "The issue for many families and schools is that social media, online games and other platforms evolve rapidly and keeping pace with the changes, as well as the benefits and risks they present, is very difficult. There is a clear need for more support for parents and schools here; the latest digital generation are savvy, but they are still children. We need to ensure that we all have the appropriate skills and knowledge to protect them, and teach them how to effectively protect themselves."

The student panel debate saw young people agree that their online lives were largely an extension of their real lives but, for some, the online environment lends itself to bolder and more confident self-expression. All the young people agreed that age ratings should be adhered to and that age inappropriate content can have a damaging effect. When asked about current areas of concern, chat rooms and platforms that allow conversations with strangers, data breaches and location sharing that can impinge on privacy were all singled out. Although platforms such as Instagram have settings that can control privacy, the desire to increase follower numbers often means that young people prefer not to limit their account to their friends, which can be a potential risk. Meanwhile, Snapchat's location sharing feature, which allows users' location to be shared, was cited as having the potential to ultimately affect physical safety.

The launch of the Digital Schoolhouse programme each year trains a new cohort of secondary schools to deliver the computing curriculum through play-based learning to their network of primary schools. This enables the programme to reach a wide audience and help inspire future tech innovators. The launch event also saw the announcement that games giant Ubisoft is also supporting the programme.

Giselle Stuart at Ubisoft said: "If you examine what you can do with computer science, it is remarkable; everything from the games industry to business, from banking to

pharmaceuticals, medicine to architecture is immersed in technology. VR and AR, which were both originally developed for the games industry, are now being used for training in multiple different industries. To increase the number of people in computer science at degree level, we need to increase it at A Level, GCSE and younger. Inspiring young people early enough to make those choices is crucial, and we believe Digital Schoolhouse is one of the most exciting initiatives in our industry."

The vision of Ukie's Digital Schoolhouse, powered by PlayStation® and sponsored by Ubisoft and SEGA, is to bridge the gap between industry and education, preparing the next generation for a digital age.

To find out more about Digital Schoolhouse, visit digitalschoolhouse.org.uk.

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