

Apps – challenges and solutions

Chatbot mobile apps – Talking Angela

What is it?



There has been a good deal of discussion in the press recently about an app for children called *Talking Angela*. This app is known as a chatbot mobile phone app and it uses artificial intelligence so that it appears to users that the on-screen character (in the case of Talking Angela this is a cat) is actually talking to them.

The initial concerns centred around the app being associated with a paedophile ring and that there were real people (as opposed to artificial intelligence) communicating with users. This is clearly not the case and the developers of the app (an organisation called Outfit 7) are very well known. As reported earlier this month in the Guardian, the app *“is part of a wider series of apps called Talking Tom and Friends [a talking dog, parrot and giraffe as well as cats], which have been downloaded more than 1.5 billion times since 2010, and are currently being used by 230m people every month – lots of children, but also lots of adults. They’ve spawned a series of popular YouTube videos in partnership with Disney, as well as a range of physical toys. Outfit7 is a well-known apps company, not a shadowy network of child-catchers....”*

Yes, the app will ask users for their name, but this is so that it knows how to address them. Yes, it will ask for their age, but this is so that it can guide them away from topics or issues that may be inappropriate. Users can have a conversation with the app – it is described as a conversation agent – but the information is carefully protected by the company and is not shared.

Advice for parents

Like many apps and social networks, Talking Angela was not designed for children and so parents would be advised to have a look at it first before allowing their children to use it.

Having said all of this, it can be difficult for parents, carers and educators to know which apps children and young people are using but clearly important that they do. Apps which are downloaded from the Apple store or the Google Play store will have age ratings. Common Sense Media also publishes reviews of the most popular apps and provides useful advice and guidance for parents as to their suitability - <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews>

OpenDoor

OpenDoor is an app which is becoming rapidly popular in schools and colleges. The app, which can be freely downloaded from the app store or from the Android marketplace, allows users to browse anonymously and will bypass any network level filtering. Schools have played a game of cat and mouse for years with pupils who have tried to use proxy servers to get around filtering regimes but the advent of 3G and 4G has meant that this has been largely unnecessary. However pupils still prefer to use Wi-Fi/broadband rather than their slow (and sometimes costly) access via 3G. As OpenDoor is an app, it is proving more difficult to block without causing problems for other apps and software. The technical experts will manage to sort these problems, but no doubt there will be other similar apps which will provide the same service. Clearly the need for dialogue and education is ever important.

