

In Egyptian myth, Apophis was the ancient spirit of evil and destruction. So it seemed a fitting name for a 390-metre wide asteroid that is potentially on a collision course with our planet. NASA has estimated that an impact from Apophis, which has an outside chance of hitting the Earth in 2036, would release more than 100,000 times the energy released in the nuclear blast over Hiroshima. Thousands of square kilometres would be directly affected by the blast but the whole of the Earth would see the effects of the dust released into the atmosphere.

Apophis had been intermittently tracked since its discovery in June 2004 but, in December, it started causing serious concern. Projecting the orbit of the asteroid into the future, astronomers calculated that the odds of it hitting the Earth were alarming. As more observations came in, the odds got higher. The asteroid was placed at four out of ten on the Torino scale – a measure of the threat posed by a near-Earth object, where ten is a certain collision. This was the highest of any asteroid in recorded history.

Alan Fitzsimmons, an astronomer from Queen's University Belfast, said: "When it does pass close to us in April 2029, the Earth will deflect it and change its orbit. There's a small possibility that if it passes through a particular point in space, the so-called keyhole, the Earth's gravity will change things so that when it comes back around again in 2036, it will collide with us." The chance of Apophis passing through the keyhole, a 600-metre patch of space, is 1 in 5,500 based on current information.

There is no shortage of ideas on how to deflect the asteroid. No technology has been left unconsidered; even potentially dangerous ideas such as nuclear powered spacecraft. The favoured method is also potentially the easiest – throwing a spacecraft at the asteroid to change its direction. One idea that seems to have no support from astronomers is the use of explosives. The next opportunity for radar observations of Apophis will not be until 2013. NASA has argued that a final decision whether or not to go ahead with a full-blown mitigation mission will have to be made at that stage. In 2029, astronomers will know for sure if Apophis will pose a threat in 2036 but if the worst-case scenarios turn out to be true and the Earth is not prepared, it will be too late to do anything.

1. Apophis _____
 - A. has the potential to destroy the whole of the Earth.
 - B. may cause damage comparable to that of a nuclear bomb.
 - C. is larger than any asteroid recorded by NASA so far.
 - D. has been given a name reflecting its ominous nature.
2. When Apophis was discovered, scientists _____
 - A. took some time to calculate its orbit.
 - B. immediately realised how dangerous it was.
 - C. decided they would never let it out of sight.
 - D. invented a scale to measure the threat it posed.
3. According to Professor Alan Fitzsimmons _____
 - A. it's probable Apophis won't come near the Earth in 2029.
 - B. passing through the keyhole may prove to be a decisive factor.
 - C. in 2029, the asteroid may change the Earth's gravity.
 - D. the chance of Apophis hitting the Earth is 1 in 5,500.
4. Scientists believe that _____
 - A. we have no effective technology now to solve the problem.
 - B. the best way to deal with the asteroid would be to blow it up.
 - C. a controlled collision could stop Apophis from hitting the Earth.
 - D. the last moment to send a mitigation mission will be 2029.

GIA SƯ CHUNG CƯ

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The world of online gaming is a growing phenomenon with millions of young men and women around the globe logging on to join in role-play games which allow them to interact with other players. *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* are two of the biggest online games. Seven million people subscribe to *World of Warcraft* and join a virtual world of *Lord of the Rings* type characters.

However, a study of 7,000 online computer gamers has revealed that one in nine were displaying the same signs of addiction as gamblers and drug users. The subjects, mostly male and with an average age of 21, were asked to fill out two questionnaires. The addictive signs they displayed included withdrawal symptoms such as depression and craving, loss of control and neglect of other activities. The results will prove alarming for parents whose children spend hours on the computer. *EverQuest*, a fantasy game in which players populate a virtual mystical world of dragons and wizards has proved to be particularly addictive, and has been blamed for marriage break-ups, child-neglect and even an obsessive player's suicide. An *EverQuest* widows' support group has been set up for people who never see their partners because they are always playing the game.

The study is the work of Professor Mark Griffiths, director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University, in the UK. "Addicted" gamers were compared to the remaining "normal" players and it was found that they played for much longer periods and were "significantly" more likely to report withdrawal symptoms. Last night Prof Griffiths said it was a largely adult phenomenon because most online gaming sites require a credit card subscription. (Fees are typically about £8 a month.) The average age of an online gamer is 29 to 30. However, he did find that some teenagers were playing, after parents subscribed to the sites. About 20 per cent of players are women, drawn by the social and co-operative element of the games.

"Although I think genuine addiction is fairly low, the thing about online gaming is that the game never stops," said Prof Griffiths, "With a stand-alone game, you can switch it off and come back the next day, but with an online game it's very difficult to log off when you know half the world has just logged on. Many gamers play excessively and display few negative effects. There is nothing wrong in itself with doing something excessively, and unlike gambling, gaming has little or no financial consequence. However, the 24-hour a day never-ending online games may provide a potentially addictive medium for those with a predisposition for excessive game playing."

In other parts of the world, such games have come in for much greater criticism. In China a girl died after playing *World of Warcraft* for three days with barely a break, and a woman in the USA blamed a game for the death of her 21-year-old son, who had a history of mental health problems, and shot himself while still sitting at his computer. In these countries a whole host of special treatments and clinics are available which claim to hold a cure for the compulsive gamer. In South Korea, the authorities have become so concerned by the numbers of young people spending too much time on computers that the government launched a nationwide addiction hotline to help combat the problem.

GAMING FORUM

Kevin, Liverpool

I used to play games every day, but last month I deleted every game on my computer and cancelled my subscription to *Warcraft*. The problem is that you get totally immersed in the games and become oblivious to the real world. What have you achieved after 11 hours in a virtual world? You might have developed your virtual character, fought a battle, killed a few dragons, but such achievements are illusory – when you return to the real world you're at exactly the same point as when you started.

Martin, Cardiff

I started playing *EverQuest* five years ago, and for the next two years the game dominated my life. But they were wonderful years and I have no regrets. I had the most amazing experiences and made loads of friends through the game. OK, so it's escapism, but how is it any different from watching TV? I know people who spend seven or eight hours a day watching TV but no one ever suggests they have a serious addiction.

1. A study has shown that _____.
 - A. some of the players of online games gamble and take drugs.
 - B. 11% of players are addicted to online games.
 - C. people who play online games are depressed.
 - D. 7,000 players showed signs of addiction.
2. According to the study _____.
 - A. it is mostly children who experience addiction problems.
 - B. gaming sites are too expensive for most people.
 - C. the majority of gamers were adults.
 - D. very few gamers are over 30.

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3. The main problem with online games is _____.
A. not enough women play them.
B. too many people log on at the same time.
C. it's impossible to switch off the computer while the game is in progress.
D. people find it difficult to stop playing because the game never ends.
4. Online games are particularly dangerous for _____.
A. people who may be predisposed to spending too much time playing.
B. everyone who plays too much.
C. people who don't have much money.
D. people who don't understand the financial consequences of playing.
5. In some countries _____.
A. compulsive gamers have to attend special clinics.
B. compulsive gamers can be cured of their addiction.
C. help is given to compulsive gamers.
D. people are much less critical of online games.
6. Which sentence best sums up the conclusion of the study?
A. Online games are essentially harmless.
B. Everyone who plays too much will eventually become addicted.
C. Online games should be banned.
D. Online games are dangerous for a minority of people who play excessively.
7. Kevin from Liverpool _____.
A. stopped playing online games because he had a problem with his computer.
B. thinks that players can't tell the difference between virtual worlds and real world.
C. thinks that you gain nothing from online games.
D. thinks that fighting battles and killing dragons are great achievements.
8. Martin from Cardiff _____.
A. thinks that playing online games is no worse than watching TV.
B. thinks that people who watch a lot of TV also have a serious addiction.
C. has been playing online games for five years.
D. wishes he could play EverQuest again.



GIA SƯ CHUNG CƯ

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Twenty-five years after they were invented as a form of computer-geek shorthand, emoticons are now everywhere. The smiling, winking and frowning faces that inhabit the computer keyboard have evolved into a quasi-accepted form of punctuation. These sweet hieroglyphs have conquered both the young and the old, as our daily communication relies more and more on text rather than the spoken word. There was a time when emoticons seemed naïvely youthful. Yet nowadays, applied appropriately, emoticons can no longer be dismissed as juvenile. They come in handy in many adult social interactions, and help avoid serious miscommunications.

Psychologists say it is only natural. People instinctively look for signals of intimacy in the human face. This results from countless generations of evolution, during which people relied on these signs as life-or-death signals to survive. When infants are given a series of geometrical patterns, their eyes will naturally be drawn to those that seem to represent a face.

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Faced with the absence of facial expressions in e-communications we should make up for it by composing e-mails that make it clear through our language that we are being cheerful, but that, of course, happens only in the ideal world. And so we've turned to emoticons. At first glance it seemed that only the younger generation took to the little faces. But in fact, in a recent emoticon survey of 40,000 users of Yahoo Messenger, 52 percent of the respondents were older than 30. Among those, 55 per cent said they use emoticons every day. 82 percent considered women more likely to use emoticons. But for men, who have a hard time using terms of tenderness, emoticons can be very helpful in conveying affection.

Emoticons have now entered even the most serious areas of life. One military veteran says that he uses plenty of emoticons in his communications even with admirals at the Pentagon, where they provide a certain cover for high-ranking leaders to comment on sensitive matters. "A wink says quite a lot," he says. "It could be a thousand different things – but I know what it means. It's a kind of code." Also on Wall Street, businessmen will use the term 'QQ' (from an emoticon symbolising crying eyes) in conversation as a sarcastic way of saying "boo hoo".

Supposedly, it all started in 1982. Scott Fahlman, a professor of computer science, was linked to an electronic university bulletin board where computer enthusiasts posted their opinions. In one note a joke about elevators was misinterpreted by some as a safety warning. So Fahlman suggested using :-) as a way to indicate jokes and :-(for serious remarks. Fahlman's "joke markers" spread quickly and within a month or so techies at Xerox were circulating a list of strikingly sophisticated new emoticons. He never received a trademark for his invention, and never made a dime from it. Before long, emoticons had accomplished what Esperanto never could, a universal lingua franca.

1. In the past, emoticons were _____.
 - A. perceived as rather childish.
 - B. used instead of punctuation.
 - C. causing some misunderstandings.
 - D. only smiling, winking and frowning.
2. The use of pictures representing the human face _____.
 - A. helped people to survive in the past.
 - B. makes our e-mails more cheerful.
 - C. is spreading among the older generation.
 - D. is hard for men who are not affectionate.
3. Which of these sentences is true?
 - A. The Pentagon leaders refuse to comment on their use of emoticons.

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- B. In military communication emoticons can have special meanings.
- C. Wall Street businessmen especially like the crying emoticon.
- D. "QQ" is a special Wall Street code emoticon.
4. Professor Fahlman _____
- A. came up with the smiling emoticon because he liked jokes.
- B. used his connections to spread the idea of emoticons.
- C. first came up with the idea of using the smiling emoticon.
- D. was a huge fan of the idea of a lingua franca and Esperanto.

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