

Senate Hearing On Kids' Safety

Squid game was an actual game popular with kids in Korea during the '70s and '80s when the show's director, Hwang Dong-hyuk, was growing up in Seoul. Noh Juhan/Netflix

The dystopian South Korean horror series "Squid Game" has become Netflix's most watched TV series, but it is quickly becoming as controversial as it is popular.

The latest controversy to arise around "Squid Game," which is rated TV-MA in the United States, relates to the interest it has sparked amongst young children. This includes warnings from an Australian school that children as young as 6 are re-creating games featured in the dark and gory hit show.

A council in Southern England recently sent an email to parents urging them to "be vigilant" after receiving reports "young people are copying games and violence" from the show. In Australia, similar warnings have been issued by educators in Sydney and Western Australia.

In "Squid Game," characters compete for a cash prize by participating in challenges that augment classic Korean children's games, with the "losers" being killed at the end of each round. Further emphasizing the show's twisted take on child's play, these games are staged in highly stylized arenas, such as an adult scale children's playground. After each challenge, these traditional children's play spaces tend to be left soaked in blood and littered with piles of corpses. The show is certainly a craze within children's digital cultures.

A number of successful channels on YouTube Kids (designed for viewers under 12) have capitalized on the "Squid Game" trend. This YouTube content includes How to Draw "Squid Game" character videos, and "Squid Game" themed gameplay videos from online video game Roblox.

This video game, which is popular with kids, enables users to program games and share them with other users.

"Squid Game" has become a very common theme in these user programmed Roblox games. Many "Squid Game" Roblox videos have hundreds of thousands or even millions of views.

On both the kids' and main version of YouTube, videos aimed at children feature people (often children) playing these "Squid Game" inspired games in Roblox, with the "Red Light, Green Light" challenge emerging as a particularly popular trend. This challenge is also a trend on TikTok, with people emulating the game in a vast variety of real life settings and in videogames Roblox and Minecraft .

The "Red Light, Green Light" scene has become one of "Squid Game's" most widely shared moments: The giant animatronic doll that acts as a deadly motion sensor in this game has been heavily meme-ified. This doll often features in video thumbnails for "Squid Game"-related children's YouTube content.

Most of these kids' YouTube videos are quite innocuous by themselves. However, they show how "Squid Game" has crept into digital content explicitly targeting young children.

The animatronic doll from the "Red Light, Green Light" game (seen here) is now being featured in videos on YouTube Kids. But the boundaries between adult and child-oriented content online have always been murky.

YouTube has been at the center of a number of controversies regarding inappropriate content aimed at children. TikTok has faced similar controversies related to children's safety on the app and problematic content being watched by children, such as anti-vaccine videos. TikTok allows full access to the app to children older than 13, but reports show children much younger are using it: Alongside YouTube, TikTok is currently facing a U.S. Senate hearing on kids' safety.

After a historic fine of \$170 million was imposed on YouTube by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission in 2019, sweeping changes were introduced to make the distinction between adult and children's content clearer on the platform. For instance, creators must now inform YouTube if their content is for children and machine-learning is used to identify videos that clearly target young audiences.

"Squid Game" appropriates playgrounds and other child-like iconography for its hyper-violent games.

Despite these changes, YouTube remains a very different beast to broadcast television, and content popular with children on both the main and children's version of the platform often differs markedly from kids' TV.

Children's YouTube content that riffs on "Squid Game" characters and scenes continues a longstanding trend of "mashup" content for children on the platform.

Like "Squid Game" content, "mashup" videos harness trending themes, search terms and characters - often featuring popular characters in thumbnail imagery and video titles.

The rising global panic about children's participation in "Squid Game" challenges echoes the "Momo" phenomenon of 2018 and 2019. In this case, a photo of a sinister figure that became associated with the moniker "Momo" went viral online (the photo was actually of a Japanese sculpture).

An international news cycle emerged about "Momo," claiming the creature was appearing in children's content on YouTube and encouraging kids to participate in deadly games and challenges.

As is now occurring in relation to "Squid Game," official warnings were issued to parents about the "Momo Challenge," advising them to be vigilant. It soon became clear the "Momo

Challenge" was most likely a viral hoax.

Momo embodied parents' worst fears about the dangers of children's internet use. Concerns about "Squid Game's" influence on children have a similar tenor: These fears may not be a response to actual dangers, but a manifestation of our discomfort with how easily adult-oriented media can seep into online content aimed at young children.

The unruly tentacles of "Squid Game's" inter-generational appeal show how streaming media challenges existing conceptions of "child-appropriate" content.

Adult anxieties about "Squid Game's" malign influence on children build on earlier concerns about this "mashup" content, but also about children's interaction with the web more generally.

The second game in "Squid Game" takes place in an oversized playground.

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