

The “Good Play” Approach

In this report, our understanding of what constitutes an ethical issue is deliberately broad and includes respect and disrespect, morality and immorality, individual behavior, role fulfillment, and positive (civic engagement) and negative (deception and plagiarism) behaviors. In setting out to explore young people’s activities in the new media, voluntary leisure-time activities or play are foremost in our analysis, although work activities (such as schoolwork, research, and job seeking) are also carried out online by youth. As in the physical world, play in the new media includes gaming, but we also include activities such as instant messaging, social networking on Facebook and MySpace, participation in fan fiction groups, blogging, and content creation (including video sharing through sites such as YouTube). Many of these leisure-time activities fall arguably in a grey area between work and play. For example, blogging can be instrumental and goal-directed, constitute training for jobs, and lead directly to paid work. Our conception of play encompasses such activities because they often start out as hobbies that are undertaken in informal, “third spaces” without the support and con-

straints of (adult) supervisors, without rewards from teachers, and without explicit standards of conduct and quality. Much of our attention in this report is focused on these third-space activities and less so on unambiguous games. In labeling such activities *play*, we do not suggest that they are inconsequential. Rather, we do so to highlight the nature of the contexts in which they are carried out and the varied purposes that participants can bring to them.

We come to this effort after spending ten years researching good work—work that is excellent in quality, meaningful to its practitioners, and ethical (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon 2001). Among many relevant findings from this research is the discovery that good work and bad work are much easier to define and determine in professions that have explicit missions, goals, and values around which key stakeholders align. For example, it is relatively easy to detect when a physician is adhering to medicine’s codes of conduct and mission because these codes are explicit, as are the outcomes of violations (such as high rates of patient mortality). It is more difficult to delineate good work in business or in the arts because these are relatively unregulated spheres of work. Journalism lies somewhere in between a bona fide profession and an unlicensed, unregulated sphere of work.

The ethics of play may be even more difficult to discern because (depending on the activity) participants do not necessarily come to it with consensual goals and values. Play can be experienced by players as both “utterly absorbing” and yet low stakes—“a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” and, by implication, “outside morals” (Huizinga 1955,

13). At the same time, play needs to be taken seriously because it expresses important cultural mores. As Geertz (1972) so convincingly argued, play (particularly “deep play”) emerges from and serves as a “metasocial commentary” on the culture in which it occurs. At the same time, some players have much greater appreciation of the make-believe and metacognitive aspects of play (Bateson 1972). All aspects of play do not harbor ethical implications, but many do, and greater awareness of their ethical potentials is surely warranted.

Play in the new digital media is fraught with different (and perhaps greater) ethical potentials and perils than offline play because participants can be anonymous, assume a fictional identity, and exit voluntary communities, games, and cyberworlds whenever they please. In short, accountability depends on the strength of ties within a given online community; where ties are weak, accountability may be rare. At the same time, online play is carried out in a digital public before a sometimes vast and unknowable audience so that a young person’s YouTube mash-up can begin as a fun after-school activity and in short order become the object of ridicule or even a spark for serious political deliberation around the world. Because so much online activity is proactive or constructionist—creating content, sharing content, or simply crafting online identities through profiles (Floridi and Sanders 2005)—a significant onus is placed on creators to consider the broad implications of their actions. Moreover, although conscious perpetrators and clear victims of misconduct surely exist at play, unintentional lapses may be more commonplace. For example, Aleksey Vayner, described in this report’s opening vignette, surely never imagined that his

video résumé would be scrutinized and mocked by a vast public. Because well-intentioned acts may result in significant, unintended harms, clear perpetrators and victims may not easily be discerned. Understanding the ethics of play is thus more urgent and yet may be more difficult than studying the ethical facets of good work. To guide our efforts, we rely on the following conceptual anchors:

▪ **Respect and ethics** Our principal focus is ethics, but this discussion also considers its close ally, respect. The distinction between the two concepts is worth noting. As we define it, *respect* involves openness to differences, tolerance of others, and civility toward people, whether or not they are personally known. The respectful person gives others the benefit of the doubt. Respect or disrespect can be observed by and directed toward very young children and will soon be recognized as such. In contrast, *ethics* presupposes the capacity for thinking in abstract terms about the implications of a given course of action for one's self, group, profession, community, nation, and world. For example, "I am a reporter. What are my rights and responsibilities?" or "I am a citizen of Boston. What are my rights and responsibilities?" Ethical conduct is closely aligned with the responsibilities to and for others that are attached to one's role in a given context.

▪ **Roles and responsibilities** At the heart of ethics is responsibility to others with whom one interacts through various roles, including student, athlete, worker, professional, community resident, citizen, parent, and friend. Such roles can be transposed to new media activities where youth are game players (akin to the athlete or team member role), online community

members (citizens), bloggers (writers or citizen journalists), and social networkers (friends). (See appendix A for a detailed overview of the range of roles that young people are assuming online.) Regardless of the context (offline or online, social or work), ethics are part of one’s membership in a group, the roles that one assumes, and the responsibilities that are stated or implied therein.

▪ **Emic and etic** The distinction between emic (internal) and etic (external) is taken from anthropology and linguistics. It allows us to distinguish between an individual’s phenomenological experience and a trained observer’s interpretations of her words and actions. Young people may not have an emic (internal) awareness of themselves as playing out various roles, offline and online. However, from an etic (external) perspective, they are assuming roles as students, employees at work, and children to their parents; such roles carry implicit, if not explicit, responsibilities. Accordingly, online conduct can have broad consequences that are not easily grasped by young people and are not transparent to them as they blog, post photos and videos on MySpace and YouTube, and interact with known or unknown others in virtual worlds such as Second Life.

▪ **Good play** Accordingly, we define *good play* as online conduct that is both meaningful and engaging to the participant and responsible to others in the community in which it is carried out. We consider how and why identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation are managed in responsible or irresponsible ways by youth in online contexts. Again, definitions of responsible or ethical conduct in online spaces may differ markedly from offline definitions. Here we

consider the new digital media as a playground in which the following factors contribute to the likelihood of good play—(1) technical literacy and technology availability; (2) cognitive and moral person-centered factors (including developmental capacities, beliefs, and values); (3) online and offline peer cultures; and (4) presence or absence of ethical supports (including adult or peer mentors, educational curricula, and explicit or implicit codes of conduct in digital spaces). Our approach to ethics does not focus solely on transgressions but strives to understand why, how, and where good play happens. We therefore delineate both perils and promises in the new media. Like new media literacy advocates (Buckingham 2003; Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Jenkins et al. 2006; Livingstone 2002), we wish to move beyond naive optimism or pessimism and encourage critical reflection on the considerable variation in the purposes and values that young people bring to their online activities.

In the analysis that follows, we explore the ethical implications—both positive and negative—of the various activities in the new media in which young people in particular are engaged. We draw on evidence from over thirty interviews with informants, including academic experts, industry representatives, educators incorporating the new media into their curricula, and youth who are especially engaged in some aspect of the new media. Interviews were approximately one hour in length, semi-structured, and partially tailored to each informant's specific area of expertise. Questions focused on the broad opportunities and challenges of the new media, youth trends in online participation (both positive and negative), and specific ethical dilemmas that have come up in each informant's teaching, research,

new media work, or online participation (see appendix B for standard interview protocols). We also draw on the growing literature on games, social networking sites, blogs, knowledge communities, and civic engagement in cyberspace, as well as long-standing research and theory about youth, media, and culture.

Several limitations in the nature of evidence that we draw on are worth noting. First, our data rely heavily on adult informants and scholarship. Second, the handful of youth informants with whom we spoke are highly engaged with the new media, often assuming leadership roles in online communities, games, and blogs. For these reasons, their perspectives may not be representative of the average young person.

Digital Youth

The headlines with which we began this report touch on the ethical issues that surface online but also refer to typical online pursuits of “digital natives” (Prensky 2001)—people who have grown up around and who regularly engage with new media. As the Berkman Center’s Digital Natives Project aptly points out, not all youth are “digital natives,” nor are all “digital natives” young people (Digital Natives 2007). Yet our attention here focuses on that intersection of youth and digital fluency. We believe that the promises and perils of the new media are especially salient for those young people who possess digital skills, spend considerable amounts of time online, and are assuming new kinds of roles there. These young people may be best prepared to use new media for good but may also be the most likely

perpetrators or victims of ethical lapses. Our interviews with informants suggest that young people are often confused by the power of new technologies and easily do things (like download music and copy and paste images, text, and software) that are technically illegal and may be ethically questionable. Because of their technical skills, a leader of a digital youth group calls young people today “babies with superpowers”: they can do many things but don’t necessarily understand what their actions mean and what effects those actions can have.

Indeed, psychological research on moral development suggests that capacities for moral decision making and action evolve over time and are affected by social contexts and experiences (Kohlberg 1981; Turiel 2006). At the same time, most research on moral development focuses on individual decisions with reference to other persons in their world. There is much less known about the evolution of moral or ethical stances in public spheres like interactive media or in relationships with institutions. As youth participate in digital publics at ever-younger ages, questions about their developmental capacities (what we might expect of young people at ages fourteen, eighteen, and twenty-five?) seem particularly important when considering their capacities for discerning the ethical stakes at play in the new digital media. Traditional psychological frameworks of moral development may need to be revised in light of the distinct properties of digital media and young people’s heavy participation with them from early ages.

To start, we need to consider evidence regarding how young people conceive of the ethical responsibilities that accompany their new media play. Do young people hold distinct concep-

tions of their responsibilities and of the key ethical issues at stake in their online pursuits? Many informants with whom we spoke claimed that digital youth are qualitatively different from older generations in an ethical sense. Awareness of ethical implications of online conduct is reported to be generally low, although variation is acknowledged. As one researcher put it, youth can range from “completely delusional” to “hyperaware” of the potential audiences. More generally, the young are purported to have distinct ethical stances on core issues such as identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. One educator also noted that young people frequently assume that all participants share the same ethical codes, even though ethics are rarely explicit online.

In the account that follows, we draw on these impressions of the ethical stances of digital youth by asking how and why traditional stances on such issues might be challenged in digital contexts. At the same time, we treat them as hypotheses to be explored through further empirical research.

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A Synthesis from the GoodPlay Project

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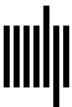
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