



PROJECT ZERO

JULY 2010

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The Contours of “Good Play” among Digital Youth

In 2006, Project Zero’s GoodWork™ Project team (led by Howard Gardner) extended the purview of our investigations of the “good”—we began to explore the ethical dimensions of play. More specifically, we began a study of how young people think about the moral and ethical aspects of their playful activities with new media, including social networks, blogs, online games, and content-sharing websites. We call this initiative The GoodPlay Project.

Our research is focused on five specific issues that we believe to be ethically significant in the new digital media—identity, privacy, credibility, ownership and authorship, and participation in a community. Foremost in our research are questions about the extent to which youth think about these issues in a critical, ethical manner when they spend time online. In 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with digitally engaged youth ages 15–25. At present, we are studying “tweens,” or youth ages 10–14.

One goal of our interviews is to discern where, when, and how digital youth feel—and, importantly, enact—a strong sense of ethical responsibility online, and where they do not. We are thus particularly attentive to the presence or absence of ethical thinking in youth’s narratives about their online participation. Interviews conducted to date with older youth yielded some troubling results. Overall, we found that while youth reported a sense of responsibility to individuals such as family, friends, and teachers offline, when online, they felt the greatest responsibility to or for themselves. When our interview participants did cite responsibilities to others online, they were typically limited to offline contacts and circumscribed online communities (e.g., gaming guilds, online forum members). Very few youth were able to reflect on their responsibilities to larger, more abstract communities online (e.g., the Wikipedia community, a larger gaming community, the Internet community as a whole). We also found a small but concerning number of cases where youth displayed a deep sense of irresponsibility, or a lack of moral or ethical thinking. Examples included spamming online forums; posting incorrect information in a Wikipedia article before a class project with the intention of tricking classmates; creating a fake profile on a social network in order to invade the privacy of a coach; and high-stakes cheating in a massive multiplayer online game. To be sure, we also found some examples of young people using new media in impressive, socially responsible ways. However, to date, many of the findings from the GoodPlay Project suggest a scarcity of ethical thinking among youth when they are online.

In keeping with the GoodWork™ Project legacy of creating interventions, we have developed educational materials to encourage youth to consider the ethical consequences of their play online. In collaboration with Project New Media Literacies at MIT/USC, we co-produced a casebook titled *Our Space: Being a Responsible Citizen of the Digital World*. At present,

we are contributing to a Digital Citizenship curriculum produced by Common Sense Media.

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CARRIE JAMES, Research Director and Co-Principal Investigator, The GoodPlay Project