'Geeking Out' on Democracy

Online youth are using new media platforms—from Second Life to YouTube—to hang out, mess around, and learn the civic skills they need to participate in today's global society.

BY HENRY JENKINS

In his book *Bowling Alone,* sociologist Robert Putnam suggests that many members of the post-World War II generation discovered civic engagement at the local bowling alley. The bowling alley was where people gathered regularly not simply to play together but to talk about the personal and collective interests of the community, to form social ties, and to identify common interests. In a classic narrative of cultural decline, Putnam blames television for eroding these strong social ties, resulting in a world in which people spend more time isolated in their homes and less time participating in shared activities with the larger community.

But what does civic engagement look like in the age of Facebook, YouTube, and *World of Warcraft*? How can we take the best practices of this participatory culture back into the social studies and civics classroom, connecting the desire to participate with core information about how the political process works? These new media platforms are reconnecting young media users with larger communities, bridging their public and private lives, and allowing them to move from media consumption toward cultural participation.

During a recent visit to Santiago, Chile, I met with National Senator Carlos Fernando Flores Labra, who believes that the guild structure in the multiplayer videogame *World of Warcraft* offers an important training ground for the next generation of business and political leaders. (Guilds are affiliations of players who work together toward a common cause, such as overcoming enemies.) The middle-aged Labra is probably not what we might expect a *World of Warcraft* player to look like. Yet he has spent, by his own estimate, "thousands of hours playing these games with hundreds of people of all ages all over the world." Labra invited business and political leaders to come together and learn more about such games. "I am convinced," says Labra, "that these technologies can be excellent laboratories for learning the practices, skills, and ethics required to succeed in today's global environment."

Playing *World of Warcraft* requires mobilizing a large number of participants and coordinating efforts across a wide range of skill groups. Experienced players find themselves logging into the game not only because they want to play, but also because they feel an obligation to other players. Participants network outside the game to coordinate their efforts and, like Putnam's bowlers, often end up discussing a much broader range of topics. Players develop tools that allow them to manage complex data sets and monitor their own performances, and the guild leaders, many of whom are still in their teens, learn to deal with the complex motivations and personalities of their teammates.

Whatever these folks are doing, they are not "bowling alone." If Putnam is correct, bowling was more than a game for postwar citizens—and *World of Warcraft* is more than a game for many students in your classrooms.

Skills and Competencies

Let's take this concept a step further. Game guilds and other kinds of social networks are as central to civic engagement in the 21st century as civic organizations were to the community life of the 20th century. If bowling once helped connect citizens at the geographically local level, these new kinds of networked communities bring together adults and youth from diverse backgrounds and across geographically distant locations in a very different manner than the relations between youth and adults in the classroom. The sons and daughters of Putnam's bowlers acquired their sense of civic responsibility through after-school programs such as the Scouts, which combined

informal learning with more recreational pursuits, and these organizations were recognized by schools and their lessons were reinforced through the classroom. Today, schools have tended to draw a line between the social networking students do on their own time and more formal modes of learning rather than allowing students to apply these emerging skills towards school subjects. When young people are engaged in these online worlds, what they are doing may look like goofing off, but creating and maintaining dispersed social ties are valuable skills in a world where the average American moves once every four or five years, often across regions, and where many of us must interact with colleagues and others around the planet.

Indeed, these skills and competencies represent the heart of what we are calling the new media literacies. These skills come not from textbooks but are acquired through young peoples' involvement in various forms of participatory culture. I use this term to describe the new kinds of social and creative activities that have emerged in a networked society. A participatory culture has relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby the most experienced members pass along knowledge to novices. A participatory culture also is one in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another. Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement.

The work we are doing at Project New Media Literacies through the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative starts from the premise that today's new media platforms represent important sites of informal learning, and that the skills young people acquire there can inform classroom practices in ways that empower them to take greater responsibility over their own learning. The time young people spend outside the classroom engaging with these new forms of cultural experience helps them master the core social skills and cultural competencies (the new media literacies) they will use for years to come. While much has been said about why 21st-century skills are essential for the contemporary workplace, learning how to navigate social networks or produce media can empower youth in all aspects of their lives and has relevance to the way they learn in math, science, and other subject areas. I am focusing here primarily on civic education, but these skills need to be integrated across the entire curriculum so that science teachers might stress ways of reading visualizations, social sciences might explain how to draw conclusions from simulations, and arts and literature instruction might re-examine appropriation.

The New Civic Engagement

In a recent report documenting a multi-year, multi-site ethnographic study of young people's lives on- and offline, the Digital Youth Project suggests three potential modes of engagement that shape young people's participation in online communities. First, many young people go online to "hang out" with friends they already know. Second, they may "mess around" with programs, tools, and platforms, just to see what they can do. And third, they may "geek out" as fans, bloggers, and gamers and dig deep into an area of intense interest to them, moving beyond their local community to connect with others. The Digital Youth Project argues that each of these modes encourages young people to master core technical competencies, yet they also may do some of the things that Putnam ascribed to the bowling leagues of the 1950s: strengthen social bonds, create shared experiences, encourage conversations, and provide a starting point for other civic activities, such as volunteering or voting.

Typically, we talk about people who are interested in public policy as "wonks," suggesting that our civic life has been left to experts. What if more of us had the chance to "geek out" about politics? What if educators could create points of entry where young people saw the workings of government as vitally linked to their everyday lives? "Geeking out" is empowering; it motivates our participation and, in a world of social networks,

Learning how to navigate social networks can empower youth in all aspects of their lives.

pushes us to find others who share our passions. In the best sense of the word then, being a political geek involves taking on greater responsibility for solving your own problems and working as a member of a larger community to solve shared problems.

Maybe "geeking out" about politics is key to fostering a more participatory democracy, one whose success is measured not simply by increases in voting but also by increased volunteerism, increased awareness of current events, increased responsibility for each other, and increased participation in public debates about the directions our society is taking. "Geeking out" might mean we think about civic engagement as a lifestyle rather than as a special event.

We still have a lot to learn about how someone moves from involvement in participatory culture to greater engagement with participatory democracy. So far, there are promising results when organizations seek to mobilize fans, bloggers, and gamers. Consider The Harry Potter Alliance, an organization created by Andrew Slack, a twenty-something activist and standup comic who saw the *Harry Potter* books as potential resources for mobilizing youth to make a difference in the world. Noticing how J.K. Rowling's novels have taught a generation to read and write (through fan fiction), Slack set out to harness the power of *Harry Potter* to encourage readers to participate in the public sphere. The HP Alliance uses the story of a young man who questions authority, organizes his classmates, and battles evil to get young people connected with a range of social-justice organizations. Working closely with musicians who perform at fan conventions and distribute their MP3s via social-network sites and podcasts and with the people who run *Harry Potter* fan websites and blogs, Slack and the HP Alliance have encouraged more than 100,000 people—many of them teens—to contribute to the struggles against genocide in Darfur, the battles for workers' rights at Wal-Mart, and the campaign against Proposition 8 in California.

Many parents and educators grumble that this generation lacks motivation or commitment and describe them as too busy playing computer games to get involved in their communities. For some teens, this may be true. But for others, it's just the opposite. Global Kids, a New York after-school organization, has been using Second Life to bring together youth leaders from around the world in a virtual playground where they can imagine and stage solutions to real-world problems. Global Kids used machinima—a technique to create real-time digital animation—to document the story of a child soldier in Uganda and circulate it via YouTube and other platforms to call attention to the plight of youth in the developing world. Much like the HP Alliance, Global Kids is modeling ways we can bridge the gap between participatory culture and participatory democracy.

A close look at the recent presidential election shows that young people are more politically engaged now than at any point since the end of the Vietnam War era. Fifty-four percent of Americans ages 18–29 voted last November, constituting a larger proportion of the total electorate (18 percent) than people aged 65 or older (16 percent). The Obama campaign used every available media platform to create an ongoing relationship with these new voters. In addition to his website, e-mails, and instant-messaging blasts, Obama was on YouTube and Facebook, featured in advertisements in several popular video games, and appeared on late-night comedy news shows such as *The Daily Show.* This new approach to politics came naturally to a candidate who fought to keep his Blackberry and text-messaging when he entered the White House, listens to an iPod, knows how to

give a Vulcan salute, and casually talks about catching up on news online. With help from the Web, the Obama campaign asked young people to participate, gave them forums to express themselves, and helped them connect with each other, thus allowing them to feel some sense of emotional ownership over the political process.

Civics in the Schools

What does all this have to do with schools? Alas, frequently, very little.

Let's imagine a learning ecology in which the student acquires new information through all available channels and through every social encounter. The child learns through school and after-school programs, on his own through the home and family, and through interactions with peers. He learns through face-to-face encounters and through online communities. He learns through work and through play. The skills he acquires through one space help him master content in another. A young person who gets fired up playing *Sim City* may discover a new interest in urban studies at school; a young person who masters a new piece of software might apply those skills to developing her next science fair project. And more abstractly, a young person may get a sense of accomplishment from sharing a video he made via YouTube, which makes him much more confident the next time he has to stand up in front of a class.

Through the New Media Literacies project, we have been developing resources for self-learning that can be used in classrooms, in after-school programs, and in homes, seeking a more integrated perspective on what it means to learn in a networked society. Yet, right now, most of our schools are closing their gates to the forms of informal learning that young people value outside the classroom. And in the process, schools may be abdicating their historic roles in fostering civic engagement.

In a 2003 report, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and the Carnegie Corporation of New York sought to document and analyze "the civic mission of schools." Historically, schools had been a key institution in fostering a sense of civic engagement. While parents were bowling, their children were getting involved in student governments, editing the student newspaper, and discussing public affairs in their civics classes. According to the report, "Long-term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later… Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest."

Yet the committee that authored the report ended up sharply divided about how realistic it was to imagine schools, as they are currently constituted, giving young people greater opportunities to participate in school governance or freedom to share their values and beliefs. Student journalism programs are losing funding and, in many cases, the content of the student newspaper is tightly regulated. Schools no longer offer opportunities for students to actively debate public affairs out of fear of a pushback from politically sensitive parents.

RESOURCES

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. www.civicmissionofschools.org

Global Kids. www.globalkids.org

The GoodPlay Project. www.goodworkproject.org/research/digital.htm

The GoodWork Project. www.goodworkproject.org

The Harry Potter Alliance. www.thehpalliance.org

Ito, Mizuko et al. "Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from The Digital Youth Project." The MacArthur Foundation, November 2008. digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/files/report/digitalyouth-WhitePaper.pdf

Levine, Peter et al. "The Civic Mission of Schools." The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003. www.ncsl.org/public/trust/civicmain.htm

Project New Media Literacies. www.newmedialiteracies.org

In reality, young people today have much greater opportunities to learn civic skills outside school. This may be why so many of them use social-networking sites to expand contact with their friends at school or why they feel a greater sense of investment in their game guilds than in their student governments. Meanwhile, our schools are making it harder for teachers and students to integrate broadband technology into the classroom. Federal law has imposed mandatory filters on networked computers in schools and public libraries. There have been a series of legislative attempts to ban access to social-networking sites and blogging tools. Many teachers have told us they can't access Web 2.0 sites on their school computers.

Rather than promoting the skills and responsibilities that will enable more meaningful participation in future civic life, many schools have closed down opportunities to engage with these new technologies and cultural practices. Many young people, as the Digital Youth Project discovered, work around these restrictions. Yet others have no opportunities at home to engage with virtual worlds or to enter online social networks. School policies that limit technology and online interaction have amplified the already serious participation gap that separates information-haves and have-nots. Students who have the richest online lives are being stripped of one of their best modes of learning as they enter the schoolhouse, and those who have limited experiences outside of school hours are being left further behind. All of them are being told two things: that what they do in their online lives has nothing to do with what they are learning in school, and that what they are learning in school has little or no value to contribute to who they are once the bell rings.

One of the goals of Project New Media Literacies is to bring participatory culture into the classroom as a key first step towards fostering a more participatory democracy. This isn't a matter of making school more entertaining or dealing with wavering student attention spans. It has to do with modeling powerful new forms of civic life and learning and helping young people acquire skills they will need to succeed in the workplace, to participate in public-policy debates, to express themselves creatively, and ultimately, to change the world. As we are doing this work, we are bumping into constraints that make it impossible for even the most determined, dedicated, and informed teachers to utilize these technologies and practices in their classrooms. It isn't simply that young people know more about Facebook than their teachers; it's that, for the past decade, schools have sought to insulate themselves from these sites of potential disruption and transformation, hermetically sealing themselves off from the mechanisms of participatory culture.

The first problem we can overcome through better teacher training. But if schools are going to pursue their traditional civic missions in ways that enhance these new forms of citizenry engagement, we must rethink our basic school policies. ●●●

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The GoodPlay Project: Exploring Youth, Ethics, and Digital Media
by Carrie James

In 2006, the GoodPlay Project was launched with funding from the MacArthur Foundation to explore the ethical contours of young people's digital lives. Led by Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we are investigating five issues we believe to be both highly salient and ethically charged in the new media: identity, privacy, ownership/authorship, credibility, and participation. Our goal is to understand the extent to which digital media is giving rise to new mental models—or "ethical minds"—with respect to these issues.

In our research, we examine the ethical models young people hold about their online activities, the supports (or lack thereof) that contribute to them, and the incidence of ethical thinking online. We have interviewed more than 60 15- to 25-year-olds who are engaged in blogging, social networking, multiplayer games, and/or online-content creation. Through this research, we have learned that these youth exhibit a sophisticated understanding of digital media, both technically and socially, and a considerable capacity for ethical thinking. Nonetheless, their behaviors are often risky or harmful.

For example, digital youth convey a high awareness of privacy issues, including unintended audiences for the disclosures they make online. Yet their actions do not always mirror, and often belie, the concerned model of privacy they express. Many do not understand the privacy settings on social-networking websites, unintentionally leaving their profiles open to large audiences. When asked about downloading, most youth demonstrate the capacity to consider the perspectives of musicians and potential impacts on the music industry. Yet nearly all illegally download music, and most are unapologetic about it. When asked to whom they feel most responsible online, youth most often cite themselves; this narrow sense of responsibility online contrasts sharply with the broader responsibilities they cite in their offline lives to friends, family, and others.

Based on our research, the GoodPlay Project team is working with Project NML to create supports to help youth reflect on the ethics of their online play. We have developed a digital-ethics curriculum for use in high schools and after-school programs. The curriculum includes role-playing activities that invite reflection about issues such as the ethics of Googling, the concept of the digital footprint, the benefits and harms of various forms of identity-play online, the meaning of credibility on MySpace and Facebook, and the ethics of appropriation.

While our curriculum does not provide simplistic answers to the ethical dilemmas often posed by digital media, our hope is that it will encourage greater ethical thinking among youth about their online activities.

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