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Graduate Studies

LEARNING, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND DIGITAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF
YOUNG ADOLESCENTS MAKING GAMES AND ANIMATIONS
ABOUT CIVIC ISSUES

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Masters in Education-Professional Development

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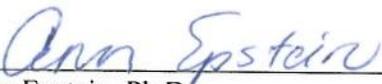
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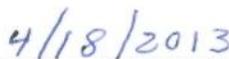
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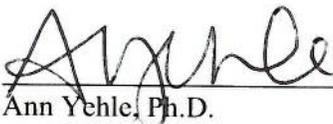
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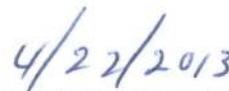
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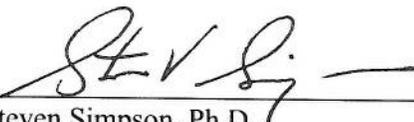


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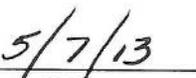


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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to examine how young adolescents use digital technologies including games, animation and storytelling for learning and participation in civic engagement. Specifically, this study examines youth participation in civic engagement through a case study of 11- and 12-year old adolescents in an after-school program. Through analyzing a series of discussions and informal interviews from the three-month period of September to December 2011 organized around categories of learning, civic engagement, and digital media, the study assesses factors contributing to success in making multimedia projects about civic issues. Participants who successfully completed final projects had personal connections to topics including bullying and homelessness. Successful participants were also able to resolve conflicts with peers, adapt to changing learning environments and use digital tools creatively, despite limitations of the available tools. Establishing a learning environment with a balance of order and self-direction was key to helping participants complete successful projects; self-direction allowed participants to explore their interests while order provided motivating constraints and a safe learning environment.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I once explained to a friend that I was interested in working with young people to help them make videos or animations about concerns they had in their communities – a sort of multimedia community activism project. My friend told me there is a YouTube channel from Peru I must see. It's called NAPA TV. NAPA stands for 'no apto para adultos' — roughly translated: “just for kids.” NAPA TV is a series of informative news reports and videos directed by youth ages 13 - 17 in Peru and posted on YouTube. Adults help with some aspects of the production and collaboration, but young people are the main guides for the program and make sure that it is their own voices that are heard. People under the age of 18 may not always think they have a voice or influence in their communities, but NAPA TV shows otherwise.

Specifically, there is a series of short videos on NAPA TV called, “Me llega!!” in which the adolescents share their thoughts on something that frustrates them. The informal expression “me llega...” might best be translated to “it bugs me...” or “it ticks me off...” Young people not often heard on the daily news get a channel for sharing their thoughts and voices. For example, a boy named Jhon from the city of Huancayo in the central highlands of Peru shares his concerns about the state of education where he lives: “Hi, My name is Jhon. I'm from Huancayo and I'm 11 years old, and I'm going to tell you what really bugs me. What bugs me is the bad education in schools. People who finish high school still have to go to another academy if they want to be able to go to

college. That really ticks me off.” (NAPA TV, 2012). NAPA TV is just one example of how the voices of young people that might not otherwise be heard are now being broadcast to the world, for anyone who is willing to listen.

Eleven-year old Jhon voicing his frustrations about the educational system where he lives serves as a good example of the type of collaboration between youth and adults that blends adolescent activism and new media. Jhon has a sincere concern that his school is not preparing himself or his peers for college. He would be unlikely to publish his own YouTube video on the matter, but a group of adolescents who produce the show on NAPA TV ask him to voice his concerns, and he is able to record his message in a powerful short video. Through a collaboration between Jhon, other adolescents and a group of adults who help support NAPA TV, the group is able to use YouTube to share Jhon’s message. Adolescent activism and online media combine to create something that is new and powerful and is a subject that begs further study.

Adolescent activism is changing rapidly in the era of new media technologies and emerging cultures of communication. Civic engagement is a topic that is closely related to activism and has typically been a field of study focused on how people or groups address issues of public concern, whether through traditional politics or other methods. Young people who have little to no role in traditional politics have opportunities to address the public issues that are important to them using familiar tools of technology. Often, young people turn to sites like YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook to voice their concerns and frustrations and try to make a difference in the matters that concern them.

Scholars are investigating the important and creative ways youth are using new media and communication tools for learning and civic engagement (Ito, 2010; Ito *et al.*,

2013 Jenkins, 2009; Rheingold, 2007; Collins & Halverson, 2009). It was Ito's (2010) call for research that spurred my interest in this topic. Ito pleads that youth-driven efforts to address topics of civic interest rather than adult-defined civics deserve more attention and research. We could better engage youth in new forms of civic engagement by recognizing and valuing their energies and creative approaches to expressing their voices using digital media (Ito, 2010). This problem of trying to better understand the ways young people use digital media for civic engagement is the main topic I will address in this study.

In order to study how adolescents use media for civic engagement, it is necessary to understand how they can develop essential 'literacies' for understanding and using new media. Just as a person must be able to read and write *and* have a broad range of experience in order to make sense of written texts and become 'literate', so too must a person have a broad range of experiences and skills using and interpreting digital media in order to develop a set of "digital literacies" (Gee, 2007). Digital literacy allows one to make sense of digital forms of media including online videos, audio, games, and animations. When one becomes fluent, he or she can make games, animations, or multimedia to communicate his or her own ideas or address public concerns. Various forms of digital media can be powerful tools, but there are substantial barriers that may slow adolescents from developing digital literacies.

Schools face many challenges and have been slow to embrace the constantly-evolving tools, technologies, and online communities for learning (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2011). This is not to discount the important roles schools have in helping students develop traditional literacies in reading, writing, math, and science;

these subjects and literacies are fundamental to learning. However in a world where students are constantly exposed to digital media, they must also become ‘digitally literate’ to make sense of all the digital information they encounter (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Challenges for schools include decreased funding for public schools and costs of digital technologies. Also, schools are held accountable for standardized test scores emphasizing traditional literacies, not digital ones. The incentives for developing digital literacies simply do not exist in most schools (though there are certainly exceptions), so young people must develop those skills in other settings.

Several after-school programs and schools have emerged that are experimenting with ways for young people develop digital literacies, like YOUmedia, a “social learning space” at the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago designed specifically for teens and filled with the latest digital media technology. In the non-school setting, teens and mentors work together to develop skills using cameras, editing videos, making audio and other digital media. The structure of the “learning space” creates enticing opportunities for youth to learn and experiment with digital media for personal goals or civic engagement (YOUmedia, 2012). In New York and Chicago, a school called “Quest to Learn” embraces digital tools (when appropriate) as a means to accomplishing broader goals of “supporting students in the pursuit academic excellence, social responsibility, and a passion for lifelong learning.” (Quest to Learn, 2013). The school is specifically designed to help students develop digital literacies because the students will need those skills to be able to navigate an “increasingly complex, information-rich global world.” (Quest to Learn, 2013). These programs serve as excellent models for my own exploration of how to help young people develop digital literacies for civic engagement.

Recently, a group of scholars including Mizuko Ito, Kris Gutiérrez, Sonia Livingstone, Bill Penuel, Jean Rhodes, Katie Salen, Juliet Schor, Julian Sefton-Green, and S. Craig Watkins have shared a model of learning called “connected learning” that helps to frame education in the context of the information age (Ito *et al.*, 2013). The model values learning that is equitable, social and participatory. Connected learning is designed to address subjects that are personally interesting to the learner and enable the support of learning through collaboration with peers and broad networks of people with different talents and abilities. Connected learning holds that learners will thrive most when they are able to connect their own interests and social learning experiences with academic studies, civic engagement, and career opportunities (Ito *et al.*, 2013).

In the opening example of Jhon and NAPA TV, the connected learning framework would serve as a useful tool for analyzing how a group of young people was able to create a video that allowed Jhon to express his concerns and share them with a wide audience. The video collaboration was peer-supported and interest-driven, with direction and help from the adolescent directors of NAPA TV and the video series, “Me Ilegal!” Of interest to me, the group of people who made the videos explored a new and powerful form of civic engagement using YouTube. This type of learning, collaboration, and civic engagement using new media is the focus of the research project I designed and will explore in this paper.

My main objective in this study was to investigate how young people use digital technologies including games, animation and storytelling for learning and participation in civic engagement. I designed experiences to help young people learn collaboratively and use digital resources to participate in the creation and sharing of media related to topics

they found to be important in their communities. Specifically, I worked with a small group of young adolescents at an after school-program to better understand how the program participants developed digital literacies in the context of a connected learning environment. I made observations and used informal interviewing techniques to investigate how they used their individual skills and worked collaboratively to create digital media that addressed issues of civic interest. The research question explored in this paper has two parts: First, how did the youth participants learn individually and collaboratively about topics of civic interest? Second, once youth participants identified important topics, how did they use digital tools to address those topics? If youth want to identify issues they are concerned about and try to make improvements, we should support their efforts. In this study, I hope to learn more about the concerns young people have and hear their ideas for improvement.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Media and Citizenship

As rapidly evolving new media and communication technologies become widely available, young people are some of the first to use the new tools in creative ways to make and share content, communicate and learn. Youth are using new media in creative ways, learning skills and solving problems through games, photo, video and audio production, collaboration, and digital remixing (Gee, 2004; Ito, 2010). As young people seek to master the use of these tools, they have an opportunity to use their skills and interests to exercise active citizenship (Rheingold, 2007; Ito, 2010). A growing number of young people are embracing digital tools as a means of participating in community networks and addressing the problems they deem relevant. Students who have self-motivated interests in creating and sharing multimedia should be encouraged to do so, and to use their skills to identify and learn about community and civic issues they care about.

A common view of American youth today is that they are apolitical — uninterested and uneducated about civic issues, and uninvolved in their communities (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2011). Various scholars have documented and discussed the ways in which youth involvement in political and civic issues has changed dramatically in recent years, showing how youth roles and interest in politics may be declining (Kleinman, Delborne, & Anderson, 2011; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, &

Brashears, 2006; Putnam, 1995). In contrast, other scholars contend that youth involvement in civic issues is changing, but not necessarily declining (Bers, 2007; Ito, 2010; Rheingold, 2007). These scholars suggest that youth are willing to share their voices about public matters, just not in a traditional political environment. Scholars have described examples of youth sharing their voices through blogging, making videos, using online petitions, and using other tools available to them (Bennett, 2008; Ito, 2010). Adolescents and young adults are using digital tools in new and creative ways to create stories that tell their own perspectives on civic matters and are redefining what it means to be civically engaged (Ito, 2010; Rheingold, 2007).

People today have unprecedented access to information compared to ten or twenty years ago. In 2002, Mitchel Resnick, director of the Lifelong Kindergarten group at the MIT Media Lab predicted that that people everywhere would be gaining better access to digital technologies as the costs of computing declined, though there would still be a real risk that not everyone would have the skills to use the technologies fluently (Resnick, 2002). Resnick's predictions have rung true; technology is now more widespread and inexpensive than ever, but a "digital divide" still exists. Some groups have more opportunities to take full advantage of technology resources and become 'digitally literate.' By creating opportunities for young people to use online resources for learning, creating, and sharing the media they've created, we can address some aspects of the digital divide. "The Internet provides opportunities to learn participatory skills and norms. Youth are increasingly engaged in informal online communities that define themselves around shared interests and that often center around expressive activities, such as the sharing of fan fiction, collaboration around a video game, or the production of

YouTube videos” (Kahne, *et al.*, 2011b). Young people can develop civic skills and practice using digital resources in a meaningful way.

For groups and individuals who become fluent in using emerging digital technologies, there are opportunities for making and sharing information in the format of text, audio and video, or even interactive media and games. When one considers that YouTube, established in 2005, has existed for only eight years at the time of this writing, he or she can begin to comprehend the recent and rapid changes that have occurred in the realm of information sharing. People young and old are using digital tools creatively to both consume information and share information. The ways in which people are increasingly and actively creating, consuming, sharing and interacting with information has been called a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2009; Kahne, 2011a; Rheingold, 2007). American media scholar Henry Jenkins (2009, p. 5) describes participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship.” Participatory cultures can help individuals learn to use new media for creative purposes.

“Participatory media” is a type of media in which individuals or groups participate in creating, re-mixing, and editing content to share with a peer audience. It can include forms of media such as blogs, wikis, community media, tagging and social bookmarking, music-photo-video sharing, mashups, podcasts, digital storytelling, virtual communities, social network services, virtual environments, and video blogs (Rheingold, 2007). These seemingly varied forms of media share three interrelated characteristics: (1) the structural form of participatory media allows every person in the network to both

create and share media with all other members of the group including text, images, audio, video, data, and discussions; (2) it is a form of social media whose value and power derive from the participation of many; and (3) the media can be shared broadly, fast, and economically (Rheingold, 2007, p. 100).

Participatory media can be a powerful tool for youth sharing their ideas and learning from others in our increasingly networked society. A recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life project showed that roughly two thirds of all teens have created media content, and more than a third of teens between the ages of 12 and 17 who use the internet have shared the content they produced (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). As youth participation in participatory media increases, educators, parents and scholars should ask how we might direct their enthusiasm to create content towards public matters and civic engagement (Ito, 2010; Rheingold, 2007). Empowering youth to address issues they deem important could be a disruptive and powerful force in changing what it means to be civically engaged. While traditional politics have generally been the way adults make large-scale changes in American society, new models are arising enabling young people to have a powerful voice as well.

A discussion of global media and citizenship would be incomplete without a discussion of how information availability relates to power structures. Castells (2009) is a social science scholar and communications researcher who examines the deep-rooted connections between information and power. Castells states that those who control the flow of information are those with the most power. What is changing most recently is that the control of information flow has been disrupted due to increased use of sites like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Vimeo, and Flickr. Thus, the role of media in the

information age is changing. While media and information exchanges were previously controlled by a select few entities, now there is a proliferation of media sources (Castells, 2009). Powerful organizations still command information exchanges, but individuals of all ages can also participate in information exchange and collaboration.

Previously, media corporations dominated the flow of information on television and radio networks, acting as a filter and determining what news was relevant to its audience (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). While corporations and media conglomerates continue to dominate the flow of media on traditional news sources such as television, newspapers, and radio, new forms of media are emerging as more people embrace personal information and technologies through the use of the Internet and wireless communication devices (McChesney, 2007). Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic change in the way information is shared. The Internet and advanced networking capabilities have made it possible for individuals around the globe to create, consume and share media and information. Both individuals and corporations now possess a diverse collection of tools needed to create powerful multimedia and communicate information to large audiences.

As a result of the new diversity of broad and interactive forms of communication, people are developing new understandings about issues that had previously been informed only by mass media (Castells, 1996). Individuals are able to learn from non-traditional media sources and share their own perspectives and findings with others. In the process, people learn about the biases of mass media organizations and learn about effective ways they can find other media sources to inform their decisions. When people explore the strengths and weaknesses of mass media's ability to communicate news and

information they may seek alternatives to the traditional systems, particularly when so many alternatives are available.

Some people who have become frustrated with traditional political systems are seeking alternative ways to make changes in communities and society (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Castells, 1996). In the current political climate, many people are frustrated with government roles in bailouts, wars, lawmaking and righting social injustices. Rather than giving up, people can attempt to communicate their concerns and raise awareness about the problems they see with people in power who may be able to help solve the problems. Young people who do not have the ability to participate in voting use the tools that are available to them to voice their concerns (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). Through inventive uses of information and communication technologies, youth are finding new ways to raise awareness about the problems that communities and society face.

New Literacies and Digital Media

Anyone who has wanted to embrace the opportunities of new media has had to develop a new set of literacies to understand the voices of others using new media and to communicate his or her own stories. Simply seeing a powerful online video or animation, or playing a captivating game can be enough to inspire an individual to learn how to make her own media creation. If an individual wants to make a YouTube video, she may have to develop a set of skills for transferring, converting or editing videos and altering audio. She will also want to learn about culture and community surrounding YouTube videos. Similarly, someone who wants to learn to make an animation or video game would want to become familiar with the games and animations that already exist, and then make his or her own games or animations. In other words, a person needs to

become 'literate' in the technical, cultural, and strategic use of these new media domains. The set of skills and understandings one develops as he or she embraces new media forms has been called "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Ito & Horst, 2009).

New literacies involve one's ability to use, explore and interpret texts and media of many different types. Like traditional literacy, 'new' literacies help people make sense of the world around them by reading and interpreting a variety of 'texts'. New literacies differ from traditional literacies by encompassing a broader definition of what is necessary to be 'literate'. Unlike traditional literacy, which generally involves the understanding of written texts and print media, new literacies focus on one's ability to interpret and use information from a variety of mediums including video, audio, and digital text and data in order to learn about the world and share stories using the diverse mediums. It is through practicing making sense of 'multimodal' texts that individuals will learn the skills necessary to understand (Gee, 2003) and critique (Kellner & Share, 2005) existing texts and make their own.

As an important framework for developing multimodal literacy and helping young people to understand the perils and promises of technology and media, authors Goodman (2003) and Kellner & Share (2005) call for educators to teach 'critical media literacy' — educating students how to understand, use, and scrutinize the media they encounter in today's world. Kellner and Share discuss models of critical media literacy, core concepts, debates and active organizations. The authors urge that in today's rapidly changing multimedia environment, it is more important than ever to support media literacy; students need to be able to critically assess the tremendous amounts of

information they encounter, using literacy skills in reading, writing and new media formats (Kellner & Share, 2005).

While schools continue to teach traditional literacy in terms of reading and writing, young people are developing new forms of literacies through their understandings of games, audio, video, and photo production, remixing and online collaboration (Gee & Hayes, 2011). In today's age of virtually limitless information sources, youth are learning how to filter relevant information and contribute their own understandings when appropriate. By developing a critical understanding of media, youth can learn how to evaluate the large amounts of information they are receiving and produce their own versions of audio, video, photo, or other multimedia to counter mainstream views with their own critical observations and reflections.

Connected Learning Framework

How will people learn to make contributions in the global media landscape? How can students develop both traditional and 'new' literacies when traditional literacies remain fundamental to learning? A compelling, evidence-based model for learning and collaboration in the modern, changing landscape is called "connected learning" (Ito, *et al.*, 2013). Connected learning serves as a useful framework for investigating how young people can learn together and use powerful tools for learning (Ito, *et al.*, 2013). It is an approach to education that "advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic

engagement” (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 4). In this section, I will describe some of the history, learning principles, and core values of connected learning, and then further explore some of the frameworks origins in constructivist theory.

A recent report on connected learning (Ito, *et al.*, 2013) is the collaboration of a variety of scholars including Mizuko Ito, Katie Salen (director of Quest to Learn schools in New York and Chicago), Julian Sefton-Green (research fellow studying youth, media, technology and informal learning) and others. Many of the people who have worked together to develop the framework of connected learning share similar educational values and philosophies. The framework does not prescribe a specific way to teach educational technologies or tools; rather, it is defined by a set of values, an orientation to social change, and a philosophy of learning (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 33).

One of the shared values of those who develop the framework for connected learning is the belief that educators have a responsibility to minimize the digital divide by providing opportunities for youth who might otherwise be disadvantaged in using digital tools. Connected learning promotes efforts that value the culture and identity of non-dominant children and youth (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 33). Young people who might not otherwise use digital media for civic engagement, academic success, or career success are helped to do so. A summary of the connected learning framework is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Connected learning framework

Learning principles:	interest-powered, peer-supported, academically-oriented
Design principles:	production-centered, openly networked, shared purpose
Core values:	equity, social connection, full participation

Core Values

A connected learning environment is a place where values of equity, social belonging, and participation are embodied (Ito, *et al.*, 2013). Each learner brings a unique set of skills and background. Facilitators find ways to foster the talents and abilities of each learner. “Connected learning addresses the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning, intergenerational disconnects, and new equity gaps arising from the privatization of learning” (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 4).

Learning Principles

Connected learning holds that there are three crucial contexts for learning: that learning is peer-supported, interest-powered, and academically oriented (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 12). Peer-supported learning involves learning environments that encourage peer interaction and collaboration, sharing, and feedback in inclusive and engaging social settings. Interest-powered learning stems from the notion that learners will get more out of an experience when the subject matter is personally interesting and relevant. Learning is designed to be academically-oriented, meaning that the learning can help an individual in traditional school academic settings, or for the purposes of civic engagement or career opportunities and growth (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 12).

Design Principles

There are four main design principles that can guide educators in creating connected learning environments: everyone can participate, learning happens by doing, challenge is constant, and everything is interconnected. The environments and activities encourage participation and provide multiple ways for individuals to contribute (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 78). Individuals in these environments learn experientially through the

active and meaningful participation. Finally, young people learn through a combination of interconnected learning contexts included receiving feedback on progress, having access to tools for planning and reflection, and by being given opportunities for mastery of specialist language and practices. (Ito, *et al.*, 2013, p. 78). Connected learning shares many of the same principles of learning as constructivism, a framework with also values social learning contexts and connections between new old and new knowledge.

Constructivism

Constructivism provides a second theoretical framework that addresses youth activism and digital expression. The framework of constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge is something that is built (constructed) by modifying and adding to pre-existing ideas and understandings. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed the constructivist framework and described how people are able to build on prior knowledge through social interactions and learning from peers and adults (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007). This framework is helpful for understanding and describing many aspects of teaching and learning.

In understanding how students learn, constructivism helps us understand the importance of allowing students to explore their curiosities, work with peers and be a part of a network that will allow them to construct new knowledge based on their current knowledge, curiosities and interests. Students who are given some agency and autonomy can build on their previous knowledge and construct new but related skills. Ito (2010) emphasizes the importance of learning using digital tools in various levels of student-to-student engagement from ‘hanging out’ (social interactions), to ‘messing around’ (experimentation) and ‘geeking out’ (advanced learning and experimentation).

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a term that is often associated with involvement with politics, but is defined for our purposes as one's awareness and participation in public matters, not necessarily political in nature (Bennett, 2007). The term often brings to mind voting, participation in political campaigns and community issues, or working with government officials. For the purposes of this paper, political engagement is just one of several components of civic engagement. As part of the connected learning framework, civic engagement is one of the important ways learners can connect what they are learning to real and important matters in the world around them. Through social collaboration, creative uses of digital technologies, and application to the real world, young people can experience learning that empowers them to make a difference in their own lives and communities.

Adults and youth participate in civic engagement when they share their concerns about issues in their community among peers or online. Civic engagement includes participation in nongovernmental areas such as community work and building awareness about social causes like environmental and economic injustices in local and global spheres (Bennett, 2007). In the digital age, people are using new tools to raise awareness and demand change about public issues they care about. The ways in which people participate in civic engagement are constantly changing, so it is difficult to compare peoples' actions today to those of people 20 years ago when evaluating how levels of civic engagement have changed.

Some scholars see the Internet and technologies as gateways for enhancing civic engagement (Boulianne, 2009; Delli Carpini, 2000; Rheingold, 2007; Youniss *et al.*,

2002) while others voice concern that technology could be a cause for diminishing civic engagement (McPherson *et al.*, 2006). Many scholars agree that there has been a decline in some aspects of youth civic engagement including voting, membership in formal civic organizations, and awareness of news and events (Friedland & Morimoto, 2005). An exception to the trend is that more youth today volunteer than before (Friedland & Morimoto, 2005). There is disagreement among scholars, however, on what is causing the apparent political disengagement and how we should react.

Robert Putnam's (1995) widely read article "Bowling Alone" describes what he views as the shrinking of civic society in America. Putnam sparked a nationwide dialogue when he documented what he viewed as trends of civic disengagement in America. He describes how Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected from each other; people now are less politically active, less trusting of each other, and less engaged in civic and community affairs. Putnam says the decline in engagement can be attributed partly to Americans spending more time consuming electronic media, especially watching television. Putnam does not acknowledge the possibility that the trends we see in youth political disengagement may be the fault not of television or electronic media, but instead the result of political systems that fail to reach out to young voters (Delli Carpini, 2006).

Many of Putnam's concerns are still relevant and discussed by authors today such as McPherson (2006), who describes how there has been an increase in social isolation in America. Discussion networks, which he defines as groups of people with whom people discuss important matters, have shrunk in size by one third between 1985 and 2004. People report they have fewer companions with whom to discuss important matters. One

possibility suggested by McPherson for the cause of the observed trends is that computer technology is fostering “a wider, less-localized array of weak ties, rather than the strong, tightly interconnected confidant ties” (McPherson *et al.*, 2006, p. 373). McPherson also acknowledges the possibility that discussion networks are not in fact shrinking but instead, the forms and types of social connection are transforming and people are staying connected in ways other than discussion and face-to-face networks. The forms of social connections will need to transform as people figure out how to balance fundamental needs of social interactions and their increased dependency on new digital technologies.

Recent reports by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggest that media and new technologies do not have all of the detrimental effects Putnam wrote about. In the 2011 report, people expressed positive views on how the Internet benefits their civic, social, professional or religious groups’ abilities to engage in a number of activities (Lenhart *et al.*, 2010; Rainie *et al.*, 2011). The report also shows that while 75% of all American adults are active in some kind of voluntary group or organization, internet users are more likely than others to be active and engaged (Rainie *et al.*, 2011). It certainly seems true that media and new technologies are tools that can be used in various ways that may be helpful in promoting civic causes. We must recognize the potential power of new media tools while also carefully assessing how the tools could help or hinder one’s ability to achieve goals for learning, civic engagement, and career success.

Cammarota and Fine (2008) describe methods and examples of youth participatory action research, showing how students can learn to identify social injustices and develop responses for how to confront or transform the injustices they identify. Collins and Halverson (2009) discuss the ways schools might embrace the power of new

technologies. Compared to businesses, schools have been slow incorporate new technologies (Collins and Halverson, 2009). They argue that school leaders should reconsider the role technology plays to better prepare students for our changing world. For example, many schools use designated, shared computer labs for online activities with students; online learning activities are seldom spontaneous and computers are not available on an as-needed basis. More schools are now trying to provide computers with internet connections so that students can have online resources available whenever needed, since students will likely use the internet to learn new things and communicate when not in formal school settings.

Youth Voice and Identity

If youth are to develop an awareness about civic issues and a voice to address those issues, they might start with modest tasks and take incremental steps towards becoming more engaged. Because there are significant barriers to civic engagement, we must consider how youth might overcome those barriers and make an entry into civic engagement in order to make it easy and natural (Kleinman *et al.*, 2011). Entering into the scene might start with a question as simple as: “What makes you mad?,” or in the words of Johnston-Goodstar (2011): “What pisses you off?” The Peruvian NAPA TV video series provided as an introduction to this paper serves as a fitting example of giving voice to young people who are responding to a similar question, naming one thing that ‘bugs them’ or ‘ticks them off’. In many ways youth are good at identifying injustices, recognizing what is fair and unfair, right and wrong. Kleinman *et al.* (2011) find that for many, incentives such as personal interest in a subject can promote civic engagement.

As a gateway into civic engagement, youth may feel more comfortable engaging in non-political issues before addressing political issues (Kahne & Lee, 2011a). In a conference session on Civic Engagement Among Young People of Color, Katie Johnston-Goodstar (2011) described how youth are often able to engage in non-political issues because they are not required to adopt a new identity in the way that political engagement demands. For example, young teens who learned that their high school was being closed the following year decided to make a documentary about why the high school should not be closed. Other non-political issues that may have low barriers of entry could include problems students see around them like bullying, environmental problems, animal cruelty, or homelessness. Young people need not adopt a political identity to voice their concerns about such issues. Formal political engagement requires individuals to learn how to fit into an established legislative system with complicated rules and procedures. Non-political engagement, in contrast, allows youth to use their own vocabulary and tools to address concerns. Using non-political issues as an entry point for civic engagement helps youth start to develop a public voice without having to adopt an entirely new identity.

Public voices and narratives

Young people typically do not have much experience identifying and voicing their concerns about civic issues in public settings. Therefore, it is important that youth have some guidance as they learn to develop individual identities and public voices about public matters. Through understanding themselves and the ways they can express their voices, youth build the foundation for engaging in civic matters and debates. What may

have initially seemed like a difficult task, entering into civic engagement, becomes more manageable as students learn to understand themselves and their own voices.

Several authors describe strategies to help students develop self-motivated paths into civic engagement. Paulo Freire (1998) and Marina Bers (2007) stress that educators must respect the autonomy of the student as they learn. Rather than having students follow an already-established curriculum specifying the activities they should engage in, individuals should be empowered to develop their own projects and through discussions and following their own interests (Bers, 2007). In youth civic engagement, it is imperative that students feel like they are actively creating their own plans rather than following the instructions of others so that they feel a sense of responsibility and efficacy for their actions. By allowing students to make autonomous decisions, they are able to realize their own abilities to identify issues, make plans, and take action to address issues they care about.

Youth as producers of digital media

I noted earlier that youth interests and identities should be considered when asking how to get youth involved in civic engagement. We also need to consider what tools young people might use for civic engagement. Many adolescents are already familiar with communication tools and technologies and can use these tools to address civic issues. By having individuals create and share multimedia about issues they care about, we ask them to be creative rather than adopt old ideas about how to make a difference in their communities. Allowing young students to be creative may lead to new and exciting forms of civic engagement that adults would have never considered.

Authors Kahne and Lee (2011a) focus on youth and young-adult (ages 18-35) roles in civic engagement because those groups are heavy users and early adopters of new media. Ito *et al.* (2013) share examples of adolescents participating in civic engagement. New longitudinal and case studies continue to provide new insights on how adolescents participate in civic engagement in a changing world.

Youth under 18 are keen to assess what is right and wrong, fair and unfair. Several case studies and articles show that when given the opportunity, middle-school and high-school aged youth are very capable of producing and sharing media about important civic issues (Boulianne, 2009; Ito, 2010; Rheingold, 2007). Despite voting age requirements, one need not be 18 years old to express his or her public concerns. In an era of powerful new communication tools and environments, there is nothing preventing a 12-year old boy or girl from using participatory media and communication tools to expose the injustices he or she observes. Young people have a unique opportunity to share their voices in public spheres like never before.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate how young people collaborate and use digital technologies for learning about and addressing topics of civic interest. In designing the research, I helped create a learning environment in an after-school program where youth participants would be able to work together to identify, research, and create media about the problems they see around them. In particular, this study used the connected learning framework from Ito *et al.* (2013) to assess and frame how youth participants learned individually and through collaboration as they made games and animations addressing topics of civic interest. Starting in September 2011, participants attended 1.5-hour workshops every week until mid December 2011 at an after-school program in a medium-sized city in Wisconsin. Throughout the research project, I used qualitative research methods to record data that would help me understand how youth participants learned about and addressed the problems that they deemed important.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an activity that helps an observer make sense of the world using a series of representations that may include field notes, interviews, conversations, and self reflection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Working with young people in an after-school program, I was able to observe and influence countless interactions among participants that helped me understand how they learned and worked collaboratively on

their projects. The insights into how participants learned in this setting were most clear to me through qualitative analysis. During the study, young people conversed, worked collaboratively and created the multimedia projects described in Chapter IV. My analyses are subjective in nature, as I was both a participant and researcher. The subjective nature of these analyses is discussed in Chapter V as a limitation of the study.

Qualitative researchers value a rich description of the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In this study, I provide a thorough description of program participants and share the story of how they came to learn about and address topics of civic interest. A descriptive account of how program participants interacted and used digital tools will help reveal the unique and creative ways young people are participating in new forms of civic engagement.

Narrative inquiry: Telling Stories to Share Experiences

Stories can be powerful for communicating youth experiences and their implications for learning and civic engagement. Youth participants in this study created narratives about two topics of civic interest: bullying and world hunger/homelessness. The process of how participants selected these topics is explored in detail in Chapter IV. Their narratives and an analysis of their interactions throughout the workshops help show what they learned about the two civic issues and how they addressed them.

I used a narrative format for describing and analyzing the results of my research. Researchers use stories in a wide range of disciplines to help communicate shared experiences. Stories help connect the reader to research; framing data and observations in the structure of a narrative helps give meaning to an experience and draws in the reader to better understand the researcher's observations. A well-told story evokes an emotional

response from the listener and can help the reader experience that story even if he or she has not observed it (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Work by Lee Anne Bell (2010) shows that stories offer a powerful framework for understanding and transforming relationships among race, racism, and power. Narratives can be powerful tools, as almost anyone can tell their story, and today, people can share their stories with wide audiences online. Bell writes, “storytelling and oral tradition are also democratic, freely available to all, requiring neither wealth and status nor formal education” (Bell, 2010, p. 16) and that “through empathic engagement, stories set the stage for affective change” (Bell, 2010, p. 18). Delgado, in his introduction to *Critical Race Theory* (2001) affirm Bell’s statement:

‘Everyone loves a story.’ The hope is that well-told stories... can help the readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others. Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 41).

Narrative inquiry is a valuable research tool that can be used to communicate and explore an experience by telling a story. While traditional empirical research focuses on establishing valid claims as evidenced by measurements and formal analyses, narrative inquiry does not claim to establish conclusions of such certainty (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Rather, narrative research aims to produce findings that are ‘well grounded’ and ‘supportable’ (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). Narrative research aims for “‘verisimilitude’ – that the results have the appearance of truth or reality” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). A story’s power rests in its ability to ring true with the audience.

Case Study

The research presented here is a case study; it is a specific and detailed account of how a group of adolescents worked together in an after-school program setting to develop video games and animations about bullying and world hunger/homelessness. As a case study, this particular instance of youth working together was designed to illustrate more general principles that lead to further insights on learning and civic engagement. Case studies provide readers with a unique example of “real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Case studies can indeed “enable readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together” (Yin, 2009 as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 253). In this study, I highlight the stories of each of the youth participants and my own interactions with them to develop ideas for using digital resources for civic engagement.

Participatory Action Research

My role in interacting with students while simultaneously learning from their interactions for can be described as participatory action research. Participatory action research is an attempt to better understand the world while simultaneously trying to contribute and make changes to it. Within participatory action research, "communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers" (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). In this study, I was actively involved in designing after-school program activities while making an effort to understand how the participants learned about using multimedia for civic engagement. The process of participatory action research involves repeating periods of observation

and reflection. Using field notes, audio recordings, and regularly recorded reflections, I was able to participate in the program sessions while continually reflecting on how the youth participants learned about civic issues. The subjective nature of participatory action research is discussed in Chapter V.

Participants

The participants in the study included three individuals who regularly attended and several others who occasionally attended. The regular study participants were Caucasian, male adolescents aged 11-12 from families of a middle-income range. Other program participants who attended initially but did not complete final projects included one female Caucasian and one male adolescent of middle-eastern descent. Voluntary informed consent and youth assent were required for all of the participants of this study. Directors at the after-school program provided a consent form to the parents, which was collected prior to the start of the study. Both parents and youth participants were provided with a full disclosure of the procedures, confidentiality, and details of this study. Youth participants and their parents were informed that they could leave the study at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names. A table with a description of the key participants in the study is included in Appendix A.

Setting

Weekly after-school club sessions took place at a regularly scheduled time for 1.5 hours per session for a total of 10 sessions. Workshops were held in the computer laboratory of the after-school club building, where each participant had access to a computer with an internet connection. The workshops followed an inquiry-based and interest-driven design where student interests and curiosities drove the planning and

improvisation of lessons. The interest-driven structure of the workshops helped me create an environment where participants freely and voluntarily put forth effort to learn about civic topics and digital tools of interest.

By being in an after-school environment that allowed flexibility in lessons, I was able to allow the participants to experiment with creative methods for civic engagement. As a flexible researcher and facilitator, I was able to observe participants as they explored their own interests. I was better able to understand some of the sociocultural aspects of their lives by not forcing conformity with a particular lesson design.

After an initial meeting, program participants brainstormed and discussed problems they saw in their community and possible ways to address those problems. Participants identified digital tools they wanted to learn how to use to create their own media. While my own expertise is in recording and editing videos, participants chose to explore how to use games and animations for making narratives about civic issues.

During the ten sessions of the multi-week workshop, youth participants learned how to make their own digital media and develop narratives about bullying and world hunger/homelessness. Participants learned about digital media and civic engagement through a process of scaffolding; I interacted with participants to assess their levels of understanding about tools and topics for civic engagement and designed activities to help the participants build on their prior knowledge and interests. A series of formative assignments including writing activities, group discussions, and peer interviews helped youth participants develop their final multimedia projects on bullying and homelessness.

Data Collection

Data collection included a series of recordings, participant writings and interviews, and written reflections designed to document how youth participants learned and collaborated. For each session, I recorded audio to document conversations and informal interviews with participants. I also recorded field notes and documented my personal reflections immediately after each session with notes of what happened, emerging themes, and ideas for planning future sessions. Additionally, I recorded several ‘talk aloud’ sessions throughout the study in which I spoke out loud and recorded audio of my reflections on how students were learning about civic engagement. In total, approximately 12.5 hours of audio were recorded and 1-2 pages of field notes were recorded after each session. Throughout the study all data was kept secure to assure the confidentiality of youth participants.

During several guided discussions, youth participants spoke about their conceptions of community and civic engagement. Students occasionally participated in informal interviews modeled after case studies by Ito (2010) and Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt (2011), and were recorded talking about activities they were working on. Following the structure of the documentary workshops presented by Goodman (2003), participants crafted multimedia narratives about a topic of their choosing and the findings of their investigations. The final multimedia projects show a culmination of what youth participants learned about using digital multimedia for civic engagement.

Data Analysis

The data that was collected for this study was analyzed to answer questions about learning, digital media and civic engagement. Throughout the multi-week study, I

watched for emergent themes and noted conversations of interest in post-session personal reflections and field notes. Audio recordings from each session were recorded in full, totaling 12.5 hours of recorded data. Due to time constraints, the 12.5 hours of recorded audio was deemed too long for complete transcription, so I developed methods for selecting the most relevant pieces for transcription. Audio recordings for sessions 1, 2, and 3 were transcribed completely; all conversations and dialogue from spoken personal reflections ('talkalouds') and sessions with participants were transcribed to text. For the remaining seven sessions, I selected relevant audio recordings by using a multi-track audio editor (Soundtrack Pro). Using the audio editor tools, I sorted segments of audio into categories of civic engagement, digital media, and learning using different audio tracks to distinguish conversations that gave insights in answering the main research questions. I used colored labels to help sort conversations and audio segments by degrees of interest and importance. Any recorded conversations that I thought may give insight into the categories of learning, digital media, or civic engagement were marked for transcription, while side conversations unrelated to those categories were ignored.

The criteria for determining which conversations to mark for transcription were subjective in nature, but I made my best effort to include all conversations related to the research questions. I also used written summaries from post-session reflections to find conversations of interest, and then found the recordings of those conversations for transcription. After sorting the audio segments for relevant conversations, the dialogue was transcribed to text. In total, 80 pages of conversations were transcribed for analysis. The data was further analyzed as it relates to Ito *et al.*'s (2013) connected learning framework. Chapter V includes a further discussion of the data analysis.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the themes and stories that emerged as I spent time with 11- and 12-year old adolescents as they developed ideas about civic issues and how to confront those issues using digital tools and other strategies. Over the course of two-and-a-half months, I met with the youth participants weekly as part of an after-school program focused on technology and civic engagement. During my time with the participants, I collected twelve-and-half hours of audio recordings and made field notes that explored two questions: First, how are the participants identifying and learning about problems they see in their communities? Second, once the youth participants identify problems they would like to see changed, how do they use digital tools to confront and tell stories about those problems?

Organization of Results

The results presented in this chapter are largely in the format of a narrative about how the youth participants came to develop projects about topics of civic interest. As a body of qualitative research, the purpose of presenting the results here in narrative form is to communicate an experience to the reader, so that he or she might understand this story of how a group of young people explored their personal understandings and experiences with bullying, hunger, war, and poverty and chose to make games, stories and animations to address some of those issues.

It was through the process of conversing about social justice issues and making digital media that participants identified and confronted those issues. Attempting to make media about social issues challenged participants to develop stories and possible solutions. I recorded conversations with participants throughout the 10-session study that give insights into what helped youth identify and confront issues of civic interest. Through an analysis of audio recording transcripts and field notes recorded each day, three main categories of results emerged that help organize the results of this study.

In alignment with my research questions on how youth identified, learned about, and confronted community and civic issues, the results of this study can be separated into three categories: learning, civic engagement, and digital media. By analyzing field notes and audio transcripts, I created a graphic organizer and categorized conversations and results into the three categories. The resulting analysis yielded a story of how a small group of young adolescents learned about making digital games and animation while exploring ideas about civic and community issues. The main theme that emerged was a series of factors that led to participants having success in creating media projects about civic issues. Those factors include: personal connections to civic issues, an ability to converse about problems, flexibility and creativity for adapting to different situations, and using constraints and organized activities to motivate performance. The four factors of the main theme are shown in Figure 1, below. These factors are discussed in more detail at the conclusion of the chapter.

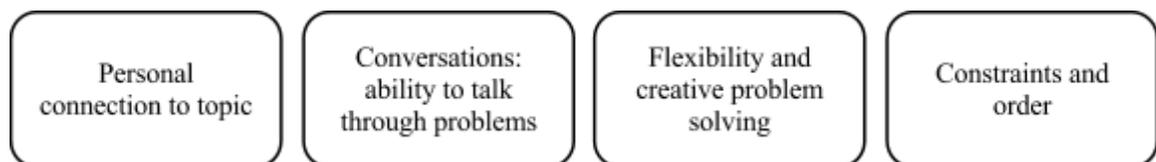


Figure 1. Factors contributing to success in making projects about civic issues

Participants became more familiar with digital media and civic engagement through a combination of pre-planned and self-directed activities. The theme of self-direction vs. order in the learning environment is one topic to be explored. This includes observations about how learning is affected for people of different learning styles, socioeconomic backgrounds and gender. I present stories and results that demonstrate how structure and planning affected learning for various individuals.

In the category of civic engagement, I present the results of how youth identified and learned about relevant community issues based on their personal and shared experiences. Each participant brought unique talents, interests, and concerns they shared with the group and helped identify strategies for addressing their concerns.

In the category of digital media, I present how participants used digital tools for civic engagement, highlighting both the strengths and shortcomings participants encountered as they tried to address civic issues. Participants showed a strong desire to make digital games, but ultimately found that the particular game-making website they were using had severe limitations as a platform for engaging audiences in understanding civic issues. After experimenting with making digital games about bullying and world hunger, participants ultimately decided to make animations instead. Whereas the game-making platform had design limitations, animation provided a more flexible medium for telling the participants' stories about bullying and homelessness.

The results will be presented as a narrative of the events and themes that emerged throughout the study. The story gives an overview of my experience working with the group over the period of 2.5 months and ten sessions, while highlighting the growth of individual program participants and how each one came to learn about digital media and

civic engagement. Throughout the narrative I present results as they relate to the theme of factors contributing to success in making projects about civic issues. A table with a description of the key participants in the study is included in Appendix A.

Week 1: Meeting The Group

The advice I received from the director of the after-school program was clear: be flexible, listen for what the kids' interests are and go from there; follow their interests if you want to have a successful program. On the first day, I arrive at the club building and meet up with the program director who lets me into a room full of rowdy, energetic young people. The director has not yet told any of the club members about the program I've proposed, so while I am there in the room he goes around asking individuals if they would be interested in learning about technology with me.

I have a plan, but I have also taken the director's advice and am prepared to listen to the kids and follow their interests. I explain to them that this will be a program on technology, but also on making media about things they care about in their community. I explain that we can use computers to make videos, animations, or games. As soon as I mention they can make games, there is an excitement that spreads throughout the room. A total of nine people in the room decide this might be something they'd be interested in, and join me at the table to learn more. The program director introduces me, describing me as an educator and someone who knows a lot about computers. I say hi and share that I have experience making videos and animations, but would also be interested in helping people make games, if that were something they wanted to do.

I wanted to learn about their interests, so I asked the nine people who'd joined me at the table to go around the room and introduce themselves. Of the eight boys and one

girl in the group, there seems to be a diverse range of interests. One boy mentions he is interested in making videos and ‘hacking’; another boy, Eddie, calls himself a ‘hacker,’ too. Other general interests among the people at the table include trains, tall buildings, skateboarding, playing Xbox Live, and building computer systems. The girl in the group, Heather, who was listening from the side until I invited her to join us, stands at the table and says she likes drawing, reading, and photography; she seems excited about participating in the program. I jot on a field note my prediction that she will be one of the individuals who will become a regular program participant.

I explain to the group that during the program, I want the participants to learn not only how to make digital media, but also to identify problems in their communities to make their media projects about. As we sit around the table, I ask the participants to shout out ideas for problems they see in the world. They mention pollution, bullying, cyberbullying, killing, and animal cruelty as problems they care about.

Next, I fall back on my own plans to show them a few examples of videos. I show them a video I’d helped make – middle-school age kids interviewing people on the streets of Madison. The video only holds their attention for about thirty seconds. Cyberbullying was a topic one person mentioned; I bring up a different video about cyberbullying made by some youth from Chicago. The video is engaging for only a short time and then people lose interest again.

“Cartoons,” says one of the people at the table, Charles, “let’s see something with cartoons.” I had recently seen an animation that was a personal adaptation of a story from the cartoon *The Smurfs*, posted on fanfiction.net; I show him the animated adaptation as an example of people telling their own stories using cartoons.

Finally, I tell the group that I've brought a video camera and that as practice, anyone who is still interested in being in the program can practice interviewing each other about things like pollution, bullying, animal cruelty, or other topics. I announce that we can make other types of media like games or animations the next time we meet. For the remainder of the first session, people in a small group take turns interviewing, recording with the camera, and being interviewed about animal cruelty and bullying.

One participant, Charles agrees to answer a couple questions about bullying. On camera, he says that he's heard that bullying is a "pretty bad problem," and that if someone is being bullied they should talk out the problem to an adult or parent, who can talk to another adult or school teacher to help solve the problem.

Another participant, Jason agrees to be interviewed by a peer and comments that animal cruelty is bad because "animals have a life just like we do." Heather asks for a turn to use the camera, and after some hesitation from others, she gets a turn. Heather interviews 11-year old Eddie in a brief 13-second recording where Eddie begs to use the camera and Heather refuses, at which point Eddie says, "you're being mean," and there is a brief moment of laughter and mild frustration.

Week 2: Finding a Balance Between Organization and Chaos

For our second session, a week after we initially met, seven students decide to participate, down from nine that had shown an interest on the first day. This time, we are able to meet in a different room, the computer lab, where there are about ten computers and there is a large table in the middle of the room. The environment looks to be more ideal than our first meeting space, as we can close the door to the room and have fewer

distractions from other after-school club members. During the session, however, I would struggle with managing the group as they discussed topics like war, hunger and bullying.

Among the program participants are six boys and one girl. I ask them to join me around the table to recap what we talked about the week before. Eddie and Jason, who had participated in interviewing their peers the week before, are ready immediately, sitting down at the table and encouraging their peers to do so as well. Jason tells one of his friends to get off the computer and join us at the table “so we can learn something.” Eddie also tries telling his peers to come to the table. I ask the participants to recall what we discussed the week before and several individuals say we’re going to learn how to make videos and games. I remind them that I want them to make videos and games about things like world problems, recalling some of the topics they mentioned the week before.

“World problems?” asks Charles. He wants to make a cartoon like the Smurf animation we saw the week before. He already has an idea for a song he wants to use with his cartoon. Other members recall other topics they’d be interested in making media about. The list shifts from general interests (Power Rangers, Star Wars) to problems they see in the world: violence, drugs and alcohol.

I pause to talk to the group about my research project. As I delve into a somewhat detailed description of my research questions and visions for the after school program, I fail to recognize that some of the young adolescents in the group are losing focus. Side conversations begin and I hear a frustrated voice from Eddie who has a camera that others want to see but he doesn’t want to share: “Hey, I’m using that. Give it back.”

As side conversations get louder and more distracting, Jason shouts to his peers, “Stop! Listen!” which seems to command some attention. I try again to describe how the

program will work and give the group important information about parent permission slips and workshop meeting times. I hold their attention for several minutes as I describe our plan for the next eight weeks. I respond to individual questions after which time Eddie jumps in to say, "I have an announcement: Snack starts in 15 minutes!" This announcement and the many that would follow would be the start of Eddie and other participants starting to think about hunger as a world problem. Each day at 4:30, program participants are allowed to have a snack. Eddie ensures we do not to miss it.

In the meantime, I answer questions Charles has about making cartoons. Two participants have wandered over to the computers and started playing online games, and another participant asks why they are allowed to be on the computer. When I call the two participants to join us back to the table, a series of events erupt into an outbreak of frustrations and yelling between four people. One person says the reason he is using the computer is because he is waiting for another person to get back into the room. When the person returns to the room, he has bread (before anyone else), which upsets some people. As the noise level quickly rises, a third person complains, "we're wasting time," and a fourth person screams over the loudening, arguing group, "Shut up! Shut up!"

Trying to calm the group, I state that I don't want any yelling, and that I need the group's attention. Eddie asks a question, needing to clarify whether or not he will be able to get bread during snack time if he participates in the group. Charles, frustrated with all the interruptions begs, "let's just start." After more interruptions from people in the room, Jason begs, "Send people back!" I try to proceed with questions for the group about politics and recent elections that had just taken place in the city. Eddie and another student, Seth, are engaged in the discussion, but others were not. After trying to ignore

several distracting side conversations, Jason says again, “just send people back if they’re not going to listen.” I agree and tell participants that I would start sending people out if they couldn’t pay attention.

We begin a conversation about their understanding of the term “civic engagement”. One participant recognizes that it may have something to do with equal rights; we build on that idea. Jason asks if it has something to do with racism. We relate the similarity of the words civic and civil and draw connections to the civil rights movement and rights and responsibilities.

I also ask about voting: “What’s the point of it?”

Charles and Seth respond jointly that it’s to decide things, and to get a voice in one’s government. I ask them about what they could do if they wanted to have a voice in their communities and government, being under 18 and not allowed to participate in formal politics. Seth suggests holding signs in public saying who to vote for. Eddie suggests changing the rules of government, having the government make a rule that kids can be president. Seth says young people could go on strike.

Jason, thinking about his media project asks, “Can we do something on a war story? Can we make like a war story that’d be like a really sad story.” I respond that yes, he could make a story or a game and ask how that could be helpful. “I think it’d help me because my brother’s in the war, and it’d help me get over that.” I agree with him, saying that creating a story would be a good idea.

Eddie, jumping into the conversation asks, “I was wondering since me and Charles both want snack right now, can we go see if Matt can give the Technology Club snack earlier?”

Jason, frustrated with the interruption, asks, “Dude, why are you asking for snack?”

Eddie replies, “it’ll be real quick. ‘Cause I’m starved.”

Charles agrees, “yeah, I’m here because they always give me snack once I’m about to leave.”

I respond by saying yes, they can leave to go ask about snack, but first I want each person to write on a piece of paper “five things in the world you wish you could change.” Eddie and three other participants list “world hunger” at the top of their list. Bullying, animal cruelty, wars, drug abuse, and ‘poorness’ (poverty) also appear on multiple peoples’ lists. Their list appears in Table 2.

Table 2. Problems identified by youth participants

World hunger	Bullying	Theft
Wars	Abuse	Bombings
Drug abuse	Animal cruelty	Price of things
Freedom	Human rights	Environment
Poorness/poverty	Shelter	Cancer
Stealing		

After the participants write down the problems they wish they could change, I ask them to switch topics and write down five ideas they have for how they, as young people, can do something to make positive changes in confronting the problems they identified.

Their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Youth-identified approaches for confronting problems

Community	Technology	Politics	Individual
Clean the environment	Make a website	Protest	Pray
Open a soup kitchen or bakery	Make video clips	Make signs	Talk with others
Have a chili cooking event	Make games	Have more freedom	Ask adult for help
Have a bake sale			
Organize a run/walk fundraiser			
Have a fireworks event			

After listing problems and possible solutions to those problems, youth participants took a break for snack, and then return to the computer lab. After asking people about what tools they wanted to learn – games, videos, or animations – we focus on making digital games for the remainder of the day. Seth asks if we’ll be using a computer program called *Alice*, something he’d learned about at a summer program for making 3D animations and games. I tell Seth no, but that we’d be creating accounts on Gamestar Mechanic, a website used for making video games and learning about game design.

I chose to use Gamestar Mechanic the day before we met, as it looked like a good tool for designing games, was accessible via nothing more than a web browser, and it was free. That day, students create accounts, join a class group, and are set free to make their own games and follow tutorials designed to help them learn about what makes a good video game. Whereas I was at the center of conversations for the first half of the day, peer-to-peer conversations filled the second half of the day. Once logged into their accounts, students swapped ideas on how to navigate the website, complete quests (games or challenges), earn badges and beat difficult levels.

The introductory games on the website are fun and engaging – an entry point for youth interested in making their own games online. Jason makes the comment, “That was easy. Oh snap. That’s fun.” I point out to the group that they will be able to keep using the website and building games throughout the week; I won’t have to be there with them. To that, Jason says, “I’m totally going to work on this at home. I mean, no doubt about that. Seth, we should hook up for this game.”

For the remainder of the day, some people complete a sequence of tutorials guiding them step by step on how to design games. Eddie jumps straight into making a game, while Jason and Charles work together to give each other tips on how to beat various levels of the games as they worked through the tutorials and quests. As other students learn that they can make their own games, too, I hear shouts of excitement, “this game is fun... I just made my own game and it’s amazing! Woo! I’m already good at this stuff.” The day ends with students excited to have made games they can play on the computer and show off to friends.

Week 3: Four Youth Making Games

At the start of the third week, several participants return to the club eager to show off the games they’ve made in the week since our last meeting. On this day, only four people are in attendance, all boys: Jason, Seth, Eddie, and Charles. This would be the trend for our remaining seven workshops; only boys showed up. The third week marked the day participants had a series of conversations and debates that ultimately helped them decide on the topics of bullying and hunger/homelessness for their media projects.

Filling me in on what he’s done since we last met, Seth comments that he has made a game and published it online for others to play. Eddie adds that he made and

published two games, some of which have already received comments and ratings. Eddie complains that Seth left a comment that said “grow up” on his game. Seth explains that he thought Eddie’s game was too easy. I add that “grow up” is not a very helpful comment. The conversation leads us into a discussion about online etiquette, or netiquette, and cyberbullying.

Charles asks if he can begin working on cartoons. He’s not very interested in making video games. I tell him he needs to get parent permission to create an account on GoAnimate, a website for making cartoons. I tell him, we’re going to try to decide as a group on one topic to make our games and animations about. Charles suggests that the price of stuff is a problem, “everything must be free.”

Eddie says he wants to make the media projects about basketball. Jason says animal cruelty, but comments that Gamestar Mechanic is limited because it “doesn’t have any dogs or anything,” so it would be hard to make a game about animal cruelty. Seth suggests, “we have seals.”

I ask the participants to try to think of a way to make games that tell a story. In games, there is problem or task, and a way to solve that problem. I ask them to construct games that are stories of someone solving a real-world problem or challenge.

In a moment of insight regarding the online game-making platform, Jason comments, “we should make it so that we could hack the game and then we could make it have food items and stuff for world hunger.” Eddie agrees, and Seth adds that they could have the flexibility to do those types of things using *Alice*, the interactive 3D programming environment he’d learned to use over the summer.

With my mind apparently already fixated on the task I'd set out to accomplish, I seem to not hear their ideas; I respond saying, "I want you guys to decide as a group which of these topics you want... It could be a game, a video, or..." As they discuss ideas for how to hack the game-making platform, I bring out the list of topics they'd brainstormed and written down on paper the last time we met, asking them to try to decide on one.

"Clean the environment," says Seth. Jason and Charles add that they had just picked up lots of trash at their school. Only three of the four participants like the idea of making media projects about trash and the environment. Eddie suggests making media about bombs, but Jason counters that bombs aren't a real problem for us.

"Basketball," says Eddie.

"Dude, basketball isn't a problem," replies Jason.

"Yes it is! I'm the one who gets hurt in it all the time," Eddie says.

"Bullying!" suggests Seth. "I want to show you guys something," he says.

We gather around Seth's computer to see a game prototype he's been working on related to bullying. Seth shows and explains, "So this about bullying. See that guy saying something."

Jason adds, "You should make like bunches and bunches of people and then be like 'jerk, jerk, jerk, jerk.'"

"I think we should do bullying. Who votes for bullying?" Seth asks.

Eddie replies, "Who votes for basketball?"

Again, Jason counters, "It's not a problem, though."

"No, I get hurt every day when I play it," says Eddie.

Seth diplomatically brings some resolution to the group: “Hey bullying works with basketball because he’s getting bullied in basketball. There.”

Eddie agrees, “yeah, bullies and basketball, let’s do that.”

But a moment later, Eddie changes his mind, “No, I think we should do world hunger. Hey I say more food.” I ask him to explain why.

“Because I got hungry,” he says. “I want to do world hunger because I’m hungry every day.” And thus, the topics for the participants’ media projects were determined on the third session of our ten-session program: bullying and world hunger.

With about 25 minutes left in the day, I ask the participants to work on games related to bullying or hunger for the next 15 minutes, then we can use the remaining 10 minutes to share ideas people came up with and people can show off their games. The semi-structured activity can give the participants a task to work on and a pre-defined amount of time to work on it. They agree and start working.

Eddie calls me over to show me the games he’s been working on, *Fire Blast 1*. Seth comments, “That’s the easy one.” Eddie responds to Seth that he didn’t have to be mean and leave a comment saying, “grow up.” Seth tries to explain his reasoning of what he meant by his comment. Later, Eddie comments that he feels bad because he doesn’t think anyone likes his game. He asks me if I’ve played his games at all. I say I haven’t, so he asks if I will log on to play them and leave my ratings and comments.

Meanwhile, Seth works on making a game about bullying while Jason and Charles work on completing quests on Gamestar Mechanic. Seth’s game involves video game characters that produce text boxes saying bully-like insults when the characters bump into each other. Jason, who would also like to make games with text boxes, asks

Seth to come help him. Eddie volunteers to help, but Jason says he wants Seth's help instead.

Seth, responding to Jason's request for help, volunteers to show Jason a way to make one of his games better. He says, "I want to show you a glitch in your game." Seth starts playing Jason's game, then enters the game editing mode and starts making changes to the game in an attempt to remove the glitch.

As Seth edits the game, Jason stops him: "Dude, let me do it. It's my game." Jason takes back the controls and stops Seth from editing his game.

Ten minutes remain in the day, so I stop the group as planned and ask them to show off progress they've made on their games about bullying and hunger. Eddie explains that he hasn't made any games about bullying yet; he's still doing 'missions' in Gamestar Mechanic so he can have more characters and game-making capabilities. Jason says he's still playing his quests, too, trying to complete a quest so that he can make text boxes in his game.

Seth is the only one who has a game to show off related to bullying. We gather around to see as he explains how someone can play the game and interact with various 'bullies' who say insults when the player bumps into them: "This guys says 'blue head.' This guy says 'brain dead.' This guy says 'feather head.' This guy says 'turd.' 'Idiot,' and then that's it," he finishes.

"Do you guys have any ideas or suggestions?" I ask the group, probing for more ideas of how to make improvements on the game about bullying.

Eddie shares an idea, related to Jason's comment earlier in the day about hacking the games. He asks, "how do you make it to where you can have them edit?"

“Have the player edit the game?” I ask.

“Yes,” Eddie replies.

“You can’t.” Seth says.

I clarify, asking if Eddie is talking about some of the quests, where the player is asked to modify the game they are playing to make it better, to which Eddie replies, “Yeah, I want to do that!”

“They can only do that in quests,” Seth says.

Eddie replies, “That sucks.” He does not have any other suggestions for improvements.

For the time that remains in the day, I ask the participants to talk a little more about why bullying is a problem. I ask, “what causes bullying?”

Jason and Seth comment that rumors and gossip can cause someone to get mad or want revenge. Eddie adds, “yeah at least there’s no girls right now in the group.”

“Girls are fine,” I argue.

Eddie says no, and Jason backs him up, saying, “most of them at school are kinda jerks.”

“Why do you think some people are mean to other people, and bully?” I ask.

“Because they might have problems at home,” Jason says.

“Sometimes they don’t know how to express their feelings,” Seth adds.

I try to relate their ideas to their games about bullying: “Alright, so maybe in your game, you have the character running into family problems or something...”

But Eddie arrives back to the same conclusion as before; Gamestar Mechanic has design limitations: “We can’t. We have no people. We don’t have houses.” The other

participants seem to agree. Trying to make compelling video games about world problems in the limited time we have and using the digital tools at hand is a difficult task. The participants end the day discussing how they might be able to complete more quests on Gamestar Mechanic and work on their video games throughout the week. Eddie and Jason say they have very limited computer access from home and will not be able to work on them much outside of the after-school club.

Week 4: Bullying and politics

When we return a week later for our fourth session, one month after our initial meeting date, the participants have experiences and thoughts to share about bullying and politics. Charles brings his parent permission form and is able to begin making cartoons online. He signs up on the website GoAnimate.com which features tools for making custom animations using drag-and-drop interfaces and features for adding text or audio. He works independently on his animation for the majority of the day.

Seth and Eddie also attend, and are actively involved in talking about experiences they've had with bullying. I am curious to know how they might have arrived at choosing bullying as a topic to make their multimedia projects about. Seth volunteers a story about a bully from third grade who hit him in the head, which caused Seth to respond by punching him back in the stomach.

I ask Seth and Eddie if there are any leaders in the community or school they could talk to help solve bullying problems, individuals who might have more power than them. Eddie mentions the two counselors at their school. Seth says they could talk to the vice principal. Curious about Seth and Eddie's thoughts about how elected leaders might

be able to solve the problems that young people deal with on a regular basis, I ask, “What about politicians?”

Seth replies, “I hate politicians. I wish all of the commercials would just shut up and stop lying in our faces ‘cause they always say they are going to do these things and then never do it... I hate politics, even though I’m probably going to grow up to be a politician.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask.

“Because I’m really good at debating.” The conversation gives me insights on Seth’s leadership skills in our group. The day concludes with participants getting time to work. Eddie and Seth help each other complete challenging quests and design games.

Week 5: Improvisation

When we meet the following week for our fifth session, we are not able to use the computer lab as a group. A group of younger club members are busy using the room for an activity, so I have to improvise a plan for our group. Luckily, I have a camera with me with video recording capabilities. I ask the participants to spend some time interviewing each other using the camera. Despite the unplanned circumstances, the day turns out to be a good opportunity to learn about some of the personal backgrounds of the participants and learn how they recruited a new member to join our group.

Seth and Eddie seem excited to learn something new and experiment with interviewing, but Jason does not seem very interested. Eddie interviews Jason first, asking him about progress he’s make on Gamestar Mechanic, but Jason does not seem interested in being interviewed and drifts off to another room where he can practice playing a guitar.

I also learn more about Charles, his family, and his interest in technology and cartoons. He explains that his dad knows a lot about computers; he can fix them and assemble new computers from scrap parts. When I ask Charles how he got interested in making cartoons, he explains, “On YouTube when I watched this one cartoon, it was pretty cool how the maker got it to move and all that. I was pretty interested in it and once I learned in technology club that we can make animations, I think I could do something that’s the same thing that I found on YouTube, and that’s how I got interested.”

I ask Charles to describe what he would make if he could make an animation about anything. He replies, “I would go over and over again until I say it’s perfect. And then I’d have some help from friends- from, experts. Like the guy that made the episodes I found on YouTube. I remember what his e-mail account is for YouTube and I might ask other experts at making a cartoon. That’s how I would do a cartoon- have some help from real experts.”

“Are there any things in the world that you wish you could change that you might want to make a cartoon about?” I ask.

“Bullying,” he replies. “I’ve dealt with a lot of it in elementary school, and it’s just a pain.” When I ask Charles what kind of animation he might like to make about bullying, he says, “I’d never really thought of that yet, I’m still trying to think through it... I’m kind of busy because I have my FanFiction and the animation.”

Near the end of the day, we are allowed back into the computer lab, where Eddie and Seth bring a new member, Wade, to the group. They have him working on completing quests on Gamestar Mechanic so he can catch up with the group. Seth says

he's completed 92 percent of the quests, whereas Wade says he's completed 17 percent of the quests.

I am curious to hear about how Wade got interested and how he's learning from Seth and Eddie. Eddie asks Wade, "You having fun?" then explains, "right now, he's just getting started. He got interested by playing, you know my *Fire Blast 1*, and I let him play some of my games and stuff. And then he went ahead and got interested." For the remainder of the day, Eddie sits next to Wade and helps him beat quests. Eddie tutors other club members in how add custom background images.

Week 6: Cyberbullying and School Learning

On the sixth week we meet together, I learn about experiences Eddie and Charles have had with cyberbullying, we discuss ways to report offensive comments online, Seth shows off a new game related to bullying, and Eddie discusses attempts he's made to teach his teachers and other students at his school about Gamestar Mechanic. Charles shares that someone he doesn't even know has bullied him online, and Jason adds that he has been cyberbullied by his own friends, and says there must be a way to block people who are bullies online. Seth joins the conversation saying that on some websites, the user can report offensive comments.

Seth goes onto Gamestar Mechanic to search through other users' games and look for an example of cyberbullying. He finds an example of an offensive comment left on a game. It reads, "This game sucks. It's impossible so you suck and I hate you stupid game and I hate you too." We call over the other people in the room to show them that Seth has clicked to report the offensive comment. The participants seem interested in learning how to report the comment, but Seth's computer crashes so we can't show the group

whether it worked or not. When we revisit the game online to try and find the offensive comment again, the comment is no longer there, so it appeared as though we were successful in removing the comment.

Later, I ask Seth to tell me about a game he's making on bullying. The game involves a player who has to make a choice between saying a compliment or an insult to the other characters in the game. He explains, "This one I'm still working on, it's called "The Right Choice". He's calling someone a jerk, he made a rude comment, he gave someone a compliment, so pick the right choice, press Z, and you don't get killed."

Eddie and Wade continue to work together on completing quests in Gamestar Mechanic and getting Wade caught up to the level where Eddie is. I ask them about their ideas for a final project, to which Eddie replies that they can't decide. I tell Eddie that we only have three more weeks together as a group, so he should start planning his project. He replies, "I don't think we'll be able to get a project done 'cause if we're going to make a project, that's going to be really hard." I tell him I'd like he and Wade to try.

I am curious to know how much time the participants spend making their games outside of our weekly workshop sessions. Eddie says, "I play it all the time when I'm on the computer," but not at home because his computer there doesn't work well.

"Where else do you get to play it?" I ask him.

Eddie replies, "I've been trying to let them let me play it at school so can teach my class, but they're not letting me."

"No? How come?" I ask.

“It’s school,” he says. Eddie adds that maybe if Gamestar Mechanic was about subjects like history, or something, and then maybe they could use it in school. He complains that they never get much time on the computers in 6th grade.

Week 7: Leaving Games Behind

With four sessions remaining, we enter our seventh week. I recruit people from the common area to join us in the computer lab to work. Charles at first declines; he’s already working on his animation in the common area, but a club leader persuades him to join us: “If you’re signed up for tech club, you need to go, you can work on it in there.” He joins us. Eddie persuades Wade to join the group again. I tell the group that day to work on their projects, and I’ll be logging on to play their games and leave some comments. The day would turn out to be a turning point in which they started to recognize the potential for using animations (instead of games) for telling stories about topics like bullying and world hunger.

I ask the group if they’ve seen any examples of other peoples’ games that get the player to think about world problems. Seth finds some good examples under the ‘featured games’ section of Gamestar Mechanic and shows them off: “There’s all these games called like the peace ones. There’s ‘allies’, ‘adventures in peace’, ‘trials of nonviolence’, ‘little sister’s problems’, ‘the animal hero’, ‘pollution’, and ‘how to stop violence.’” I ask the group to try playing some of the featured games if they want to get some ideas.

For the majority of the day, I sit down with Charles. He has run into some limitations making cartoons using GoAnimate. On this day, I’ve brought my laptop computer with some animation software, and I offer to sit with Charles and show him

how the software works. I tell him he can tell me what he wants to animate, and I'll help make it happen. Charles agrees, and we sit down and launch an animation program called 'Motion' on my computer. The free-flowing story that evolves starts as Charles asking to animate an image of a vase and turns into a David vs. Goliath story of a small character standing up for himself.

"Can you think of something that you want to animate?" I ask.

"I don't know, a vase?" he replies.

I draw a vase in the animation program and ask, "Okay, what do you want to have the vase doing?" He has me draw a platform and the vase sitting on the platform, then the vase gets tipped over and hits a ball that starts rolling. I ask, "What do you want it to do next? what do you want that ball to do?"

Charles replies, "Um, hit something like a bigger ball where it will roll down a little wooden slide, then it will hit something with a little brush, then it will hit the switch of a fan, turn it on, and spin the wheels of a wooden fan, and it will open a gate."

We start with the first step, "Okay, so you want (the small ball) to hit a bigger ball?"

"Yeah..." I make an animation of the small ball hitting a bowling ball at the edge of a ramp, to knock it down the ramp.

I start to add a descriptive label in the animation software, "and I'll call this 'ball.'"

"Bowling ball," Charles corrects me.

"Okay. "Bow-ling ball," I speak out loud as I type in the label.

“Or you could go ‘*Bullying ball*,’” Charles suggests, chuckling as he realizes the pun in the word choice and how it works as a nice metaphor, “and the little guy’s the victim standing up for himself.”

Eddie and Seth stop over to see what we are laughing about, and Charles proudly shows off and explains his animation: “Instead of ‘bowling ball’ its ‘bullying ball’, and the little pebble’s the victim, that gets strong.” The last step of the animation is the ‘bullying ball’ gets locked up in a gate. Seth suggests the ‘bullying ball’ ends up getting launched into a prison gate. Charles likes the idea a lot, deciding maybe it should get locked up in the principal’s office, instead. Charles seems impressed at how it seemed to spontaneously evolve from his own ideas and Seth’s suggestion, almost the way an improvisation skit turns into something unplanned and unexpected but delightfully unique. We save the project and exit the animation program. Charles concludes, “never really planned for this, but I’m usually one for quick thinking.”

Charles did not attend any of the remaining workshops we held together as a group, so “The Bullying Ball” served as his culminating multimedia project. The animation attracted the attention of Eddie and Charles and would give them ideas for using animation for their own projects for the days that remained.

This day would also be the final session that Eddie made a video game about hunger. He soon moved on to exploring animations for telling stories. Eddie describes his final attempt at making a video game about world hunger: “Oh yeah I made a game where you have to shoot turkeys. I like turkey.”

Week 8: Global Citizenship

When we meet for our eighth session, we have an interesting group conversation on the topics of community and making global-scale positive changes. A younger club member enters the room and overhears a conversation we're having about community. He asks, "What is community?"

After some scoffing remarks from Eddie, I ask our group to answer the question seriously. It's a good question, I say. Eddie responds, "It's a place where you live."

Seth adds, "it's the city, it's the people... *This* is a community, kind of... a group of people that share the same space."

"Are there any things in the community that you wish you could make better?" I ask.

"The food source," says Eddie, "oh, here are some good ones: lowering prices of gas, making all food access free, and I mean all stuff free because I'm kind of hungry now."

Seth asks Eddie, "yeah, but would that contribute to the umm, community?"

"Yeah, the homeless!" Eddie replies.

Seth tells Eddie he doesn't think there are many homeless people in the area.

Eddie says yes, there are: "There is this hobo that goes and sorts cans and trash on 15th and Market all the time... There are hobos all over. Like the church hobos, that stands outside waiting for their doors to open. So they can go get dry."

Next, Seth shares a story about a project his school is doing to help people in need in another country. Seth and Eddie have an interesting debate about what is the right way to help others in need. Seth shares the example of what they are doing.

Seth says at school, “we are doing this thing for Nicaragua.”

“What’s Nicaragua?” Eddie asks.

It’s a place in Central America, I explain.

Seth continues, “Last year they made between 500 to 1200 dollars. And it’s for the water filters for the people in Nicaragua.”

“Wait, don’t they have faucets?” Eddie asks.

Seth explains, “No, Nicaragua is a poor country.”

Eddie shares an idea, “oh, know what we should do? A robber should rob a giant bank and give it all to Nicaragua.”

“Well that wouldn’t really be legal.” Seth says, and I confirm.

Eddie trying to rationalize the situation says, “Yeah but, he’s giving it to poor people so that’s not a crime.”

“Yes it is. It is still a crime,” says Seth.

“No it is. Explain how it is a crime,” begs Eddie.

I ask them to stop for a moment to consider if there would be any ways they could use technology to help people in Nicaragua. Eddie suggests, “Post stuff on Facebook, Myspace; Wade can post it around Cubelands (an online game).” He also suggests, “Since they don’t have nothing there that involves technology, give them (Nintendo) DS’s... Give them computers, give them phone, give them electricity, give them wood, give them food, give them farms.”

After listening to Eddie’s suggestions, Seth stops him to bring up a few points he thinks Eddie should consider first: “Eddie listen. Alright, we don’t just want to go over

there and say, 'you're doing this wrong,' and tell them that everything they are doing is wrong. That is their custom. We don't want to change their custom."

Eddie revises his ideas and says, "I know, give them food, give them farms, don't they have farms? Give them grass seeds, for Pete's sakes."

"They have grass," says Seth.

"I know. Make it more grassy on the beaches," Eddie suggests.

Seth, trying not to laugh, says, "The beaches aren't supposed to be grassy!"

Eddie, chuckling and admitting the fault of his argument says, "I know, I just want to see a grassy beach kind of." Returning to a more serious suggestion, he says, "here's a better thing than everything... give them money and food."

Later in the day, Seth asks if he can sit down with me to learn to use the software that I'd been using with Charles the week before. I say yes, and both Seth and Eddie sit with me to explore using the animation software to tell stories about bullying and homelessness. Sorting through some images I have of fish and sharks, Eddie gets an idea: "Oh! I know one. Make a guy... First add a fish, wrapped up. Ooh! Add a swordfish and a shark."

I ask him to tell me the idea he has for an animation. He says, "well it is about, a fisher that goes up the seas that catches giant swordfish but... he has to sell it. But this dude that wants to buy it doesn't have the money to and he has to make a really difficult choice either to either to give it to him, or tell him to get lost. In the end he... does the right thing and gives it to him."

Eddie tells me he doesn't want to work on a game any more; he'd rather work on an animation about the story of the fisherman. He starts to expand on the story, but stops:

“Yeah it is a story about a fisherman and a nasty gross hobo that, that goes to bars every night when there is free – I mean I’m just getting carried away, that was some hobo in Kenosha. He went to the bars every time they had free food and free drinks.” We work on making animations of fish and recording sound effects for the remainder of the day, experimenting with using the animation software on my computer.

Week 9: Working on Final Projects

For our ninth session, our second-to-last, I start recording audio of conversations as usual but something happens to my recorder and the recording stops working. I keep field notes to record our interactions for the day. During the day, Eddie expands on his story of the fisherman, choosing character names and more images to use with the animation.

Seth surprises me by bringing in an animation he made about bullying using *Alice*, the 3D programming environment he learned to use over the summer, which he has installed on his computer at home. His animation, titled “Prevent Bullying,” is the story of a young person in a school who encounters an older bully in the hallway. The bully calls the smaller person a nerd and pushes him to the ground. As the bully pushes him to the ground, the principal enters the scene. He calls the bully to his office and tells the young person that he will be taking care of the problem. The animation ends with the nerd character turning to the camera and saying, “Please help prevent bullying across the U.S.A.” The entire script can be found in Appendix B.

Seth shows the group his animation and we are all amazed that he created the animation on his own. The animation uses text boxes to communicate the dialogue, and I suggest we also record the dialogue using their voices, then I’ll add the audio and some

sound effects and bring the animation back the following week to show them the finished product. They agree, so we spend the remainder of the day recording audio and sharing ideas for how to make an animation for Eddie's story of the fisherman, which I tell them we can make on our final workshop session the following week.

Week 10: Final Day, Eddie's Story

When we meet for our final session working together, all of the youth participants are excited to make Eddie's story come to life as an animation and to see the finished version of Seth's bullying video, complete with recorded voices and sound effects. Having only an hour-and-a-half to complete Eddie's story, I am amazed to see how the four participants in attendance are able to work together, bringing each individual's talents into the process of making the story a reality. All of the discussions we'd had – about Eddie's own cravings for food, community problems of homelessness, and ways of solving problems like world hunger – seem to work their way into Eddie's final project.

In attendance on our final day are Eddie, Seth, Wade, and another participant who had attended some of the initial workshops, Carlos. Eddie asks if Wade if he'll help write a script for his movie/animation. Wade is a year older and has shown skills in writing. He agrees to be the scriptwriter. Eddie has the story worked out in his head already, so I ask him to sit down with Wade and describe to him the details of the plot and what he envisions for other key story elements.

Eddie starts, "Well, it's about a hobo, and he's hungry. He goes to a fish market wanting a giant swordfish..." Eddie answers a few clarifying question from Wade and explains that there are three people in the story: a hobo, a fisherman, and the boss of the fisherman. When the hobo asks for a free swordfish, the boss says no, but the fisherman

decides to go out to sea and catch the homeless man a fish anyway. In the end, Eddie explains, the fisherman “quits his job and gives out free fish to the homeless.” Once Wade gets a clear understanding of the story, he begins working on the script

Wade launches a word processing program on a computer and begins typing. Eddie stops Wade momentarily to show him some background images of storm clouds for the second scene where the fisherman is out to sea. The fisherman is out trying to catch the swordfish when a storm rolls in, sharks start jumping out of the water, but the fisherman survives, catching a swordfish and bringing it back for the homeless man.

As Wade writes dialogue for the story, Eddie and Seth try to decide character names and who will act out each character’s dialogue. Eddie volunteers to be the mean boss, ‘*Crabhead.*’ Carlos decides to be the narrator for the story. Wade says he’ll play the homeless man, ‘*Smallfry.*’ Seth volunteers to be the fisherman, ‘*Sharkbait.*’ As Wade continues writing the script, he notices Eddie getting off task and tells him to help the others find images for the animation. I remind the group that we only have this day to finish the story. I announce that in twenty minutes, I want to begin recording audio, so they’ll need to have the script ready by then.

Seth and Eddie go to find digital images of the characters that I’ll use for the animation. They find an image of a fisherman who is in a yellow rain jacket, and a homeless man with a large beard, camouflage jacket, and orange shirt on under the jacket. The man has red boots and is holding a cigarette. As they search for the final image of the mean boss for the story, an image of Chuck Norris distracts Seth.

Wade scolds them, “Stop messing around...; we’re recording in like ten minutes.” Wade gets his friends back on task. He also finishes writing the first scene. Ten minutes pass, and it is time to record the dialogue for the animation.

The narrator and participants playing the roles of the story characters speak out the story of the homeless man, Smallfry, waking up on a beach hungry and walking two miles to the fish market to try to find food. He encounters the mean boss, Crabhead, who denies him free food, but luckily meets the kind fisherman, Sharkbait, who offers to go off fishing to catch the homeless man a swordfish.

After recording the dialogue for the first scene, we have less than twenty minutes remaining. I ask the group to clarify what needs to happen for the remaining scenes, so we can record any dialogue that takes place. I tell them that I can assemble the audio later and put it together with the images for the animation. The group decides that the remainder of the story can take place in two scenes: a storm at sea and another scene back at the marketplace.

The marketplace scene will have dialogue, which I tell the group they’ll need to improvise, but the storm scene will not need any recorded words, just sound effects and animations. Eddie clarifies the details of the ‘Stormy Seas’ scene, saying that Sharkbait will go out to sea and have to fight off a giant storm and sharks that jump out of the ocean, but he survives and catches a swordfish to bring back for the homeless man.

For the third and final scene, the group has little time to clarify what all needs to happen in the story and record all of the necessary dialogue. I ask Eddie to give us a quick recap of the story: “What happens after Sharkbait brings back the swordfish?”

Eddie explains, he “gets off the boat, he gives him the free swordfish, and Sharkbait stands up to his boss and opens his own fish store and it’s free for the homeless.”

Eddie, Wade, and Seth quickly work out the words the characters need to say and logistics of recording the dialogue. Wade suggests that at the end of the story, Sharkbait also gives Smallfry a job working at his new fish store. With only five minutes remaining, we start recording the dialogue for the final scene. We record three takes, and Seth, Eddie, Carlos and Wade finish just in time. Our time together comes to an end and I am happy to see their stories be completed and see that they all had fun with the challenge of finishing Eddie’s story. The complete transcript of Eddie’s story can be found in Appendix C.

Summary of Results and Themes

Over the ten workshop sessions, I was able to make observations and identify key themes in the categories of learning, civic engagement and digital media through conversations and informal interviews with youth participants. Recorded conversations and field notes were analyzed for information relevant in addressing the question of ‘how can youth can use digital media for civic engagement?’ The results helped show how participants of different learning styles interacted and developed ideas about civic engagement during self-directed and planned activities. Some participants showed an ability to adapt to both chaotic and structured activities, but some participants voiced frustrations and ultimately stopped attending the workshops. Of the initial nine club members who showed an interest, only three members stayed with the program to complete final projects. Participants learned about civic engagement and digital media

through a combination of guided discussions, social learning and independent exploration.

Participants identified problems they saw in the world and in their communities including war, bullying, hunger, and homelessness. Eventually, participants created projects including games and stories addressing bullying (“The Right Choice”) and hunger (“Turkey Shoot”) and animations including Charles’s ‘The Bullying Ball,’ Seth’s ‘Prevent Bullying,’ and Eddie’s story of a homeless man, a fisherman, and the fisherman’s boss. Some ideas were not fully developed into stories, for example Jason’s idea to make a story about war to help him deal with his brother who is a soldier. Jason voiced frustrations about the sometimes-chaotic learning environment and limitations of the online game-making platform, but also suggested ways to improve the game-making platform.

On the category of digital media, participants spoke of the engaging and fun qualities of the online game-making platform, Gamestar Mechanic, but also criticized its limitations for making games for civic engagement. The participants noted that the characters and settings available in the game editor were limited and suggested making the editor more ‘hackable’ as a way to overcome the limitations. Participants explored using animation as an alternative digital medium for telling stories and created their final projects using recorded audio and digital animations instead of games. The main theme that emerged from the results was a series of observations on what factors led to success in youth participants making final projects about civic issues. The main theme and its components with commentary are shown in Figure 2.

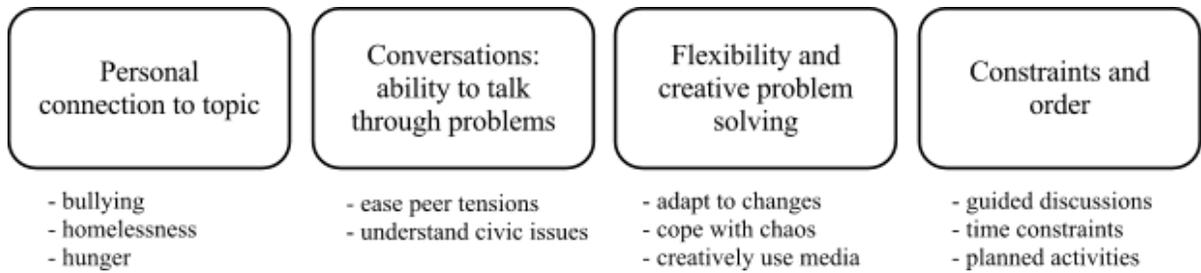


Figure 2. Factors contributing to success in making projects about civic issues

First, all participants who made final projects identified a personal connection to the topic, be it bullying, homelessness or world hunger. Second, participants showed an ability to talk through problems. Participants who could talk through problems also showed an ability to ease tensions with their peers and stayed with the program longer than others. Third, successful participants demonstrated flexibility with program conditions and creative problem solving. Participants had to develop creative uses of digital media despite some of the limitations they encountered. An example of creative problem solving included Eddie’s tendency of suggesting creative ways to ‘change the rules’ if something isn’t working. Participants who could adapt to changing learning environments and cope with some of the chaos that existed during parts of the program were able to remain involved with the program and create projects. Finally, a certain amount of constraints and order in the learning environment helped participants be successful in creating their final projects. Guided discussions were essential for uncovering views about world problems and time constraints often helped participants be successful. Constraints of digital media platforms and time limitations often led participants to creative strategies and insights.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Building on the description of how the group of young people in this study was able to explore using digital media for civic engagement, this chapter serves to further discuss the meaning of the results described in Chapter IV. Included in the discussion will be some of the limitations of this study, interpretations of the results, and implications for my own teaching practice.

Limitations

Certain considerations must be discussed that limited me in being able to answer my research questions. The limitations addressed here include those resulting from the subjective nature of my role as a participant researcher as well as those limitations resulting from the study settings and nature of the after-school program.

As a participant researcher, I had dual roles, both facilitating learning experiences and analyzing the interactions of the youth participants. As a result, there was an inherent difficulty in making an objective analysis of peer interactions because I often influenced the peer conversations. The results and discussions in the study are therefore subjective in nature because of my dual role as a participant and observer. Other sources of subjectivity include my process of selecting key audio recordings for transcription and analysis, using consistent but subjective criteria (as discussed in Chapter III). Other limitations include those resulting from the difficulty of doing research in the specific study setting of the after-school program.

In the after-school program, participants were not required to attend the workshops; all participation was voluntary. As a result, I was not able to observe all of the participants each week to see their progress towards learning about civic engagement and creating multimedia projects. Of the four main subjects of this study (Eddie, Charles, Jason, and Seth), only Eddie and Seth attended every session. Jason attended approximately half of the sessions while Charles attended seven of the ten sessions. Of the participants who attended regularly, none were female and all were Caucasian, with the exception of Jason, who was of middle-eastern descent.

Another limitation of this study was that I had very limited knowledge of the family and socioeconomic circumstances of the program participants. Any knowledge gained was through informal conversations during workshop sessions. I did not probe to ask about factors like family income, parental status, educational levels, or other circumstances that seemed too personal. These factors likely would have helped me answer questions about how each participant was able to learn about how to use technology and gain understandings of civic issues, but I was not able to gather much information about these matters.

A final limitation of this study is that I was not able to discuss my findings or interpretations with any of the program participants, the after-school program director, or any parents of the participants who may have been interested. It would have been helpful to share my results and interpretations with the participants, their parents, or the program director to see if they agreed or had further insights, but I was not able to do so.

Interpretations

In this section I interpret each subject's path of learning as well as address the results of the study as they relate to broader topics of learning, youth activism, global citizenship, and digital literacy. I start by discussing each participant individually, then discussing what the implications of this study are as related to adolescent activism, global citizenship, and digital media literacy. But first, how did each of the youth participants learn individually and collaboratively in identifying and addressing topics of civic interest?

Story 1: Seth

Seth contributed to our workshops by bringing his expertise with technology, skills in debating, and a level of creativity that helped him and his peers learn about ways to use digital media for exploring civic issues. While Seth was not very outspoken during the first two sessions, he emerged as a group leader and technology expert by our third session when he was able to show off several games he had created and contribute to discussions in a small group setting. Seth's prior experience using *Alice* – a computer program for programming and animations – would help Seth and his peers to develop ideas about how digital media could be modifiable, or 'hackable.'

From early on in the program, as participants began completing quests on Gamestar Mechanic and building games, Seth excelled in making games and being an influence on his peers as they developed their games. Eddie and Jason frequently asked Seth for help in completing challenging quests. After participants first got their accounts, Seth left a comment saying 'Grow up' on Eddie's game *Fire Blast 1*. Eddie seemed to take Seth's comments and criticisms seriously and confronted Seth about it. When Seth

explained to Eddie that he thought his game was too easy, Eddie became upset that no one would like his game. This conversation may have helped Seth realize the impact of his comment and come to a better understanding of how people feel in cases of cyberbullying. Seth seemed to be more careful about his comments after that, and did not leave more upsetting comments on Eddie's games.

Throughout the 10-week program, Seth seemed to be comfortable working in a wide variety of situations including self-directed activities, group discussions, and even slightly chaotic situations like when people started becoming upset and yelling. Seth was also able to stay levelheaded during debates, often bringing up good points about civic engagement and digital media. In one of the discussions we were having about politics, Seth said, "I'm really good at debating." Seth's reasoning and debating skills helped him become a leader in the group and negotiate arguments on occasion. Once, during an argument between Jason and Eddie about whether 'bullying' or 'basketball' should be topics for multimedia projects, Seth brought resolution to the group by saying Eddie's example of getting hurt while playing basketball could be an example of bullying. It seems likely that Seth's ability to feel comfortable working in a variety of settings and calmly debating topics with his peers is one of the reasons why Seth was one of two participants who attended all of the sessions.

Seth was able to develop a number of games and animations about bullying. He was quick to start experimenting with games related to bullying, the first of his group to do so. He was resourceful and found good examples of games other people had made about other civic issues like pollution and violence. These other games probably gave him ideas for how he could make a game about the topic he had identified as a problem,

bullying. As Seth developed his games, he helped his peers think of ways to improve their games and actively participated in discussions about global citizenship.

Story 2: Charles

From the onset of the program, Charles showed an interest in making media and participating in conversations about bullying. On the first day, Charles expressed an interest in making cartoons and said on camera that bullying is a “pretty bad problem,” while identifying solutions to bullying like talking to an adult or parent who can help solve the problem. When I described the after-school workshops as an opportunity to make videos and games about world problems that the participants could make a difference about, the idea seemed strange to him. He questioned, “World problems?” Mostly, Charles seemed to want to make cartoons about topics besides bullying.

Charles’s path of learning about civic engagement and making media followed a different trajectory than the other participants, one that was more independent and focused on learning to make cartoons instead of games. While other participants seemed immediately engaged by making games on Gamestar Mechanic, collaborating to solve quests, Charles was determined to make cartoons; he worked patiently and independently as he learned to make them. I was not able to dedicate as much time with Charles as with the other participants who made games, but Charles seemed content to work independently as soon as I set him up with an account on GoAnimate. Charles said that he was inspired to make cartoons by other videos he’d seen online and had ideas about how he would try to connect with other “experts” online to help him learn to make cartoons. Charles sometimes became frustrated by disruptions in the room, like on the

first day when he exclaimed, “let’s just start” amongst the chaos, but I think he was able to handle some of the chaotic situations by working independently and tuning others out.

When I initiated discussions about civic engagement, Charles offered valuable comments and stories that helped him and others to think about the problems they saw around them. Charles spoke of experiences he had with bullying in elementary school and with cyberbullying and shared some of Eddie’s experiences with being hungry, saying he also attended the after-school program partly because of the food they receive.

When I asked Charles about what ideas he had for making a cartoon about a problem he identified, like bullying, he noted that he was currently busy and didn’t have immediate plans to make a final project. He was working on some fan fiction and his first cartoon, “Deep Dark Secrets.” Following my own philosophy of not wanting to force anyone to make projects if they didn’t want to, I let Charles keep working on his projects, hoping that he would find an opportunity to make a cartoon about a topic like bullying. While I preferred that participants found self-directed learning opportunities, I was glad that at the beginning of our seventh week, one of the club leaders persuaded Charles to join us for the day by being more demanding than I had been. She said to Charles, “If you’re signed up for tech club, you need to go, you can work on it in there.” Charles attended the workshop that day and created his final project for our group, the “Bullying Ball” animation. Charles’s interest in animation and experiences with bullying ultimately evolved into a creative story of a small character standing up for himself and sending the bigger “Bully-” ball through a series of Rube-Goldberg like contraptions into his rightful place, the principal’s office.

Story 3: Eddie

Words I would use to describe Eddie are: fearless, energetic, captivated, unconventional and constantly hungry. Observing Eddie as he learned about civic issues and ways to address them was both entertaining and insightful. Eddie's unfiltered comments offered a unique glimpse into the workings of his mind and his creative ideas.

A theme I noticed in Eddie's approach to solving problems was this: If something isn't right, change the rules. In a conversation about youth and politics, I asked the group what they could do if they wanted to have the same power in making changes the way our political leaders do. Eddie suggested, "make a rule that kids can become president." His idea is simple and unconventional, but perfectly rational. In school, he tried teaching his teacher and classmates how to make games using Gamestar Mechanic, but they would not let him because as he explained, "It's school."

Eddie also mentioned that he thought Gamestar Mechanic should be modified so that users can create games where the player has to edit the game in order to complete a level. He had seen the feature as he completed a quest and wanted to do something similar for his own games. Ultimately, I think this was one of the limitations of Gamestar Mechanic that led Eddie to explore alternative mediums for telling his story about a civic issue. Eddie had noted limitations of Gamestar Mechanic as early as week three when our discussion about the causes of bullying led to the conclusion that sometimes bullying stems from people's problems at home. When I suggested the participants try to incorporate people with home problems into their games, Eddie said, "We can't. We have no people. We don't have houses." Ultimately, telling a story aloud and recording

the audio for an animation proved to be a more flexible medium for Eddie's project about hunger and homelessness.

Eddie's constant struggle with being hungry after school evolved into games and an animation about hunger and homelessness. At first, Eddie seemed compelled to make a media project related to basketball, but through conversations with his peers and his own reflections, he came to develop ideas about ways to address other problems he saw in his community. Eddie mentioned people he'd noticed in the community like 'hobos' he'd seen sorting cans and trash and another person he'd seen who would frequent the bar when they offered free food or drinks. Eddie's discussion of these examples shows him trying to piece together an understanding of social justice issues like homelessness and hunger. Reflecting on these stories and sharing them with other members of the group helped Eddie develop ideas about the problems that exist in his community, and ways to address those problems.

In an attempt to make media related to the problem of hunger, Eddie made two projects: the first was a game that involved the player shooting turkeys for food, the second was his final project about the fisherman and his moral dilemma about what to do when a homeless man asks him for a fish, "He has to make a really difficult choice either to give it to him, or tell him to get lost. In the end he... does the right thing and gives it to him." Having probably experienced the conflict himself when he saw 'hobos' in his community, Eddie resolved that his story's character would 'do the right thing' and feed the homeless man.

Eddie was one of two participants who attended all of the ten sessions during our program. Certain clues hint at why he stayed with the group and seemed engaged with

learning about digital media and discussing civic issues. My first time meeting the group of people interested in the club, one participant identified himself as interested in ‘hacking’ to which Eddie replied that he was a ‘hacker,’ too. He identified with the technology and wanted to make games and videos from the beginning. Eddie was also eager to participate in discussions and debates about civic engagement.

Eddie stayed with the program even though some tensions developed between him and several other participants. On the first day, Eddie and a female participant, Heather argued briefly about sharing a video camera. On the second day more tensions developed between Eddie, Jason, and Heather, as Eddie interrupted some conversations to mention that snack time was arriving. Ultimately, Heather stopped attending (by the third session) and Jason only attended half of the sessions. Eddie seemed relatively undeterred. When Eddie did become upset with the comment Seth left Eddie’s game saying “grow up,” Eddie talked with both Seth and myself about the comment times during the day and was able to resolve the conflict by the end of the day. I think that Eddie’s ability to talk through problems and his captivation for learning about digital media kept him inspired to stay in the program.

Story 4: Jason

Jason was a participant who seemed very excited about the program in the beginning, but gradually lost interest and stopped attending by the fifth session. On our first day Jason was interested in participating and named animal cruelty as a problem worth addressing. He volunteered to be interviewed on camera and explained that animals have lives just like we do, so they shouldn’t be mistreated. On the second day, there was more disorder in the room and Jason struggled to keep his peers focused on

learning and not being disruptive. He called over his friends at the beginning of the session from where they were seated at the computers and encouraged others to come over, “so we can learn something,” he begged. As side conversations in the room got loud and disruptive, Jason pleaded, “Stop! Listen!” He asked me to “Send people back” if they were being disruptive; the chaotic learning environment was very difficult for Jason to work in.

When the room was less chaotic, Jason contributed his thoughts freely. Jason asked if it would be possible to make a media project about war, perhaps even a sad story, saying that it might help him cope with his struggles with having a brother who is a soldier. Jason seemed to be thinking ahead to how he could make a project to address problems that he cared about, but became upset when other people seemed to be distracted from the task at hand or did not take the project seriously. For example, Jason became annoyed with Eddie and his constant comments about snack. Jason made it through the second week, and seemed much happier during the second half of the session when he and his peers were able to work collaboratively on making games. He was excited to continue working on games throughout the week, even suggesting to Seth that they work together, saying, “I’m totally going to work on this at home... Seth, we should hook up for this game.”

During the third week, Jason started to point out some of the limitations of using Gamestar Mechanic, and I think he started seeing the online game editor as not immediately relevant as a tool for addressing problems like war, bullying, world hunger, or animal cruelty. He noted that it was very difficult to make a game about animal cruelty because, for example, “there are no dogs” that users can incorporate into their

games. Thinking about how to make a game about world hunger, Jason was the first to suggest that it would be great if the game designer could ‘hack’ the editor to add food items and other objects and characters related to a story about world hunger. Jason’s ideas to hack the game design platform resonated throughout the group, but unfortunately there was nothing we could do in the moment to change the way the game editor worked.

During the session, two other incidents happened that seemed to upset Jason. First, Jason and Eddie debated whether or not ‘basketball’ would be a relevant topic for their projects. Eddie was insistent that basketball was a problem that should be addressed because he always got hurt when he played, but Jason argued the point that basketball is not the type of problem we were trying to address with our media projects. Jason wanted to address ‘real’ problems like war and animal cruelty. He became frustrated arguing with Eddie. The second incident of the day was that Jason asked Seth to come over and help him with a game. When Seth came over to help, he volunteered to show Jason a ‘glitch’ in one of Jason’s games, and then began editing the game without Jason’s consent. Jason told Seth to stop editing his game, saying it was his game and he could design it however he liked. The series of incidents were upsetting to Jason and likely gave him pause when deciding whether or not to attend future workshop sessions. Despite Jason’s initial interest in the program and great ideas for making media projects about personally relevant topics including war and animal cruelty, I think that the combination of tensions with peers and limitations in the game-making platform ultimately caused Jason to lose interest in the program and stop attending.

I suspect that similar tensions dissuaded other members from staying involved with the program as well, such as Heather who left the group despite her interests in

reading, writing, photography and my initial prediction that she would stay with the group. She struggled with the chaotic environment and frustrations that developed during the second week just as Jason did and was working with boys who did not seem to accept her into their group. When Heather left our group, Eddie and Jason talked about how they did not get along with girls very well. Eddie made the comment “at least there’s no girls right now in the group.” When I tried to say there’s nothing wrong with girls, Jason responded saying, “most of them at school are kinda jerks.” I didn’t know how to respond, but I wish I would’ve had a better plan for creating an environment that encouraged more participants, including girls, to stay in the program and develop media projects about civic issues they cared about.

Learning environments: Balancing Self-direction and Order

The framework of ‘connected learning’ (Ito *et al.*, 2013) holds that learning is enhanced when students are able to address subjects that are personally interesting and when they can collaborate with peers and broad networks of people with different talents and abilities, often to produce some type of end product (Ito *et al.*, 2013). Learning works best when a group of peers can support each other, each member of the group fully participating and contributing his or her unique talents for a shared purpose (Ito *et al.*, 2013). I saw these learning and design principles exemplified during our final session, Week 10, when four individuals worked together to finish Eddie’s story about the homeless man and the swordfish.

Throughout the ten workshops, I had struggled to find a balance between self-directed, interest-driven activities and planned activities; I suspected different participants desired different types of activities. I feared the lack of structure during some parts of the

program had caused tensions that may have driven some of the participants away. Perhaps realizing too late, I saw that in order to keep all participants engaged, I needed to make sure people with different learning styles, genders, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds felt comfortable in the learning environment. I needed to ensure that each person could contribute his or her unique talents to the group. If I could do this program again, I would pay closer attention to tensions between group members and be more proactive about communicating with the participants. I might pull a participant aside to ask if the tensions I perceived were real, and if so, we could collaboratively make a plan that would help all the participants feel more safe and welcome.

Although the group grew smaller as participants left, Week 10 was a shining example of how participants of different backgrounds and skill levels worked together, given a limited amount of time, to create a great story addressing the problem of homelessness and hunger. Eddie's story showed off many of the characteristics of connected learning. The first characteristic was his story was interest-driven. Eddie and many of his peers talked almost every week about how they were hungry for snack, often begging to leave early to get food. The story of homelessness and hunger was also interesting to Eddie because of experiences he had seeing homeless people in his community: seeing one man collecting cans in the streets and another man who frequented the bar for free food or free drinks.

The second and third characteristics of connected learning shown during our final session were peer support and a shared sense of purpose. Producing Eddie's story involved a group collaboration that used each individual's unique and diverse talents for a shared purpose: to record the audio for Eddie's story by the day's end. The time limit

gave the task a sense of urgency and demanded some order during work time. The four individuals – Eddie, Seth, Wade, and Carlos – worked together to finish the story just in time. Eddie was the visionary for the story and recruited others to help him. He recognized Wade’s talents for writing and put him to work writing a script immediately. Eddie shared his story with the group aloud, and asked Seth and Carlos to work helping with the script and finding images to use in the animation. Wade emerged as leader in the group, telling his group members to stay on task when they got distracted online. When it came time to record audio, each group member decided whose character they’d best represent, and assumed the role of that character for the story. During the final scene, with no time to write a script, Seth and Wade jumped in to offer their improvisational dialogue skills for the final recordings and to conclude the story.

Eddie’s story also followed the connected learning framework; it was production-centered and designed as a form of civic engagement. As a production of digital media, in this case a story recorded as digital audio to be turned into an animation, the end product can be shared with others and reviewed by the participants in the future. The story may gain relevance and meaning as it is shared and discussed with others. Creating and sharing media may allow an individual to become a part of a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2009) where he or she interacts with other people working on similar projects. The element of civic engagement – addressing the problems of homelessness and hunger – helped give his final project both personal and public relevance.

Part of what seemed to help create an engaging learning environment on the final day was the element of structure that was imposed by time constraints. The time-constraint factor seemed to give learning environment a balance of self direction and

order. Participants recognized the urgency of staying on task and reminded each other to keep working on the project or it would not be completed. If I had introduced activities earlier in the program with set goals and some constraints, I may have eliminated some of the situations where distractions in the room became upsetting or frustrating for participants.

Connected learning calls for creating learning environments that are equitable and accessible for people of all backgrounds. A challenge I experienced was keeping girls and minorities interested and involved with the program. Researchers have long recognized that “educationally-privileged youth with effective learning supports are home are able to take full advantage of the new learning opportunities that the online world has to offer and translate those opportunities to their academic and career success” (Ito *et al.*, 2013, p. 25). Authors Livingstone and Helsper (2007, as cited in Ito *et al.*, 2013) describe how young people climb a predictable ‘ladder of opportunities’ as they become more skilled internet users and learn to use the internet and media for academic success, civic engagement, and career success (Ito *et al.*, 2013, p. 25). For this case study, it seemed true that educationally privileged youth had an easier time learning how to use digital tools for civic engagement. Seth, who had participated in a summer workshop on computer programming and animations, and also had access to a fully-functioning computer at home, excelled in finding creative ways to use games and animation for civic engagement. Eddie and Jason both commented that they did not have reliable access to computers or the internet at home; as a result, they had less time to experiment with making games for civic engagement.

The question remains: What other supports could help non-dominant groups connect new media to civic activities? Based upon my own observations, supports should include assessing the interests and talents of the participants, designing activities that embrace those talents and interests, trying to reduce conflicts and tensions between group members, and using storytelling as a tool for addressing civic issues. Storytelling is a tool that is accessible to diverse groups and can be recorded to create a digital project that can be shared or developed into another medium like animation. It is my hope that in the future research will identify more ways to support non-dominant groups in developing self-directed, interest-driven and technology-enabled learning, as is the desire of others (Ito *et al.* 2013).

Civic Engagement and Adolescent Activism

Civic engagement is one's awareness and participation in public matters. In the case of this study, the participants developed an awareness of public matters including bullying, homelessness, hunger and explored ways to address these issues. Some of the youth subjects, including Charles, Eddie, and Seth participated in creating games and/or animations about these matters. While civic engagement often refers to addressing public matters with a wide audience, youth participants in this study explored civic issues in a more private setting. Participants became more aware of public matters through group conversations and personal development of stories and media about civic issues.

An example of how youth participants were able to discuss and learn about civic engagement is the conversation between Seth and Eddie about Nicaragua. At the start of the conversation, Eddie had never heard of the country before and by the end of the conversation he has a better understanding of the country, some of its problems, and he

and Seth discuss what would be effective methods for helping the people there to solve their problems.

The conversation shows Eddie's growth in awareness about civic issues by his ability to talk through the country's problems with Seth. This conversation and the many others he would have in debates with Seth, Jason, Charles, and other peers would help him develop an awareness of social justice issues and way to address them.

Conversations provided an important way for participants to learn new perspectives from their peers.

The trend that I saw about all of the topics of civic engagement identified by youth participants was that they were personally relevant. Eddie identified with hunger and homelessness based on his own experiences and nearly all the participants had stories and experiences with bullying. The personal relevance of the topics helped keep participants engaged over an extended period of time.

Of the three participants who made final projects during the 10-week program, one might ask, 'what is the impact of those projects?' The media seemed to have an impact in the sphere of the group and on a personal level for participants, but the impact did not extend much into the public. Games made on Gamestar Mechanic were shared publicly, but most of the games published were not about topics of civic engagement. Creating games provided an opportunity for youth participants to have conversations about making games about civic issues, and the civic issues themselves, but ultimately the participants saw the digital video games as a limited medium for telling stories about bullying and homelessness. The participants' final animation projects were not shared

online. It is possible that they would have shared them online if we had several more weeks of workshops.

Digital Media and Literacy

I started the program at the after-school club thinking using digital media would be a powerful way for participants to share stories about the issues they cared about. What I learned throughout the ten-week program was that the sharing of digital media (with a large public audience, at least) had little to do with how individuals learned about civic engagement during our time together. It was the participants' conversations and stories that were powerful; the learning and awareness of civic issues arose as participants spoke about problems they saw around and tinkered with making digital media related to those issues.

Learning to make digital media such as games was an engaging activity and participants learn about new tools for storytelling. Many participants spent time during the weeks completing quests, playing others' games, and making games to show to the group. Most of the participants started the program with an interest in playing video games, so it was natural that they might also be interested to learn how to make games. Other participants shared interests in making videos and cartoons. Charles said he was inspired to make cartoons by some videos he'd seen on YouTube. I suspect that popular culture captivated the interest and attention of many of the participants who were involved with the after-school program.

As participants learned to make games on Gamestar Mechanic, they were captivated and felt compelled to complete quests on the website to earn new badges, characters, and tools for making their games. Some participants even published games

they made online and eagerly awaited comments and feedback from other players. Eddie noted that he played Gamestar Mechanic “all the time” when he’s on the computer. The Gamestar Mechanic website has an engaging structure for teaching users about how to make, share and play games. However in the end, participants identified the shortcomings of Gamestar Mechanic for making games about civic issues like bullying, animal cruelty, or hunger and homelessness. Animations and recorded audio proved to be more versatile mediums for telling the participants’ stories. In our case, using digital media seemed to be less strongly connected to giving voice to world problems than small-group discussions and conversations.

Does digital media literacy have a place in schools? According to Eddie, it doesn’t, though he wishes it did. Eddie described how he tried to teach his teacher and class about how to use Gamestar Mechanic and he said his teacher would not allow it.

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s school,” he explained.

School is not a place for making video games, at least in Eddie’s class. They have limited time on computers in school and when they do, they are not learning how to make digital media. Digital media is powerful for communicating information, but students are not focusing on becoming ‘digitally literate’ in schools. Seth, for example, learned to use *Alice* not at his regular school, but at an extra-curricular summer program he participated in. In the case of this study, developing stories and animations as part of the after-school program was an engaging way for participants to learn and share ideas about civic issues in a small group.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Research Questions

To finish this study, I return to my original research questions. First: How did the participants identify and learn about problems they saw in their communities? They did this through sharing and listening to each others' stories and personal experiences and through conversations and arguments about world problems. The participants' discussions helped them learn about new places, problems experienced by people in other parts of the country and world, and possible ways to address those problems.

My second research question was: Once the youth participants identified problems they wanted to see changed, how did they use digital tools to confront and tell stories about those problems? After creating games about civic issues, participants identified limitations of the game-making platform and identified animations and recorded dialogue as better mediums for telling their stories. The participants used traditional story formats to decide how the story characters should solve the problems. Participants in the group shared the stories within the small-group setting but did not share them with a wider, public audience.

Future Studies

For future studies, I would like to explore three topics. First, I would like to learn how to have similar workshops that encourage the participation of more female and minority youth participants. Second, I would like to have participants share their media

projects with a wider audience and learn more about implications of public sharing. Finally, I would like to take the suggestion of the participants to make media platforms more ‘hackable,’ exploring the development open-source and freely modifiable media-making platforms for games and animation.

Implications For Professional Growth

I finish this study as I enter the field of teaching; I conclude this paper by considering how what I’ve learned will guide my future professional practice. First, I have learned about the importance of maintaining a balance of flexibility and order in a teaching and learning environment. Activities with structure and clearly identified objectives can often give students a goal to work towards. Organization and order in the learning environment is helpful and necessary for many individuals. Constraints of time and technology limitations can be viewed as helpful challenges and can help motivate students to work in a focused manner if they see the designated goal as relevant and meaningful. I see myself growing as an educator as I learn to create purposeful activities with defined constraints.

While structure plays an important role to teaching and learning, flexibility also remains essential. Structure guides a learning experience but cannot predict the exact path; things change and students and teachers must adapt. Some of the most important insights I gained during this study came from listening to participants’ suggestions and letting their interests guide our future workshops. The ebb and flow of planning and adaptation is a delicate balance that can blossom into unpredictable and beautiful forms, like an animation about a ‘Bullying Ball,’ or a story of a fisherman who stands up to his boss to do what’s right and feed a homeless man in need. I have learned that one of the

most important things I can do as an educator is to encourage students to have conversations, to debate, to discuss and learn about the topics they are interested in. Digital media has a role in this, but ultimately it is the conversations and the learning that is important, not the media itself.

If you will recall the introduction of this paper, an eleven-year old boy Jhon from Huancayo, Peru shared his commentary on one thing that really ‘ticks him off’ in this world. Jhon said that what makes him mad is “bad education in schools.” The YouTube video of Jhon voicing his concerns can be viewed by anyone in the world with an internet connection. I shared Jhon’s story as an example of a young person empowered by digital media to make a difference about world problems. But how can one measure the impact of videos like this? As I write this, I see that the video has a count of only 150 views on YouTube. The video is not powerful as digital media because it has reached many people (indeed, it hasn’t), but it is powerful as a story that has reached a small audience (including myself) and has inspired many thoughts and conversations. A story need not reach large numbers of people to make a profound impact.

If someone asked me several years ago, what’s one thing that ticks me off, I may have said the same thing as Jhon. I disliked the shortcomings of schools. It makes me mad that the education world has not embraced digital media and is not connected to online learning environments. I dislike that students at many schools aren’t allowed to access to YouTube and aren’t assigned to make digital media projects to share with the world; I started this study and workshop with similar thoughts. I wanted to get participants online and sharing media and connecting with others in the world. What I learned was that participants did not need to share their media with a large audience for

this to be a valuable learning experience. They needed to share stories with each other and have small-group conversations to develop their own ideas about world problems and what they could do to address some of those problems. It may be that the young people I worked with take the initiative to share digital media projects about world problems on their own, but that did not happen during our time together. It was conversations and stories that provided the most meaningful learning experiences for the youth participants and myself.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE OF KEY PARTICIPANTS

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Seth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 years old • Excels at making games on Gamestar Mechanic • Attends all 10 weeks of workshops • Has knowledge of ‘Alice’ computer animation program from summer workshop • Has computer and internet at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares stories of being bullied • Emerges as group leader: engaged in conversations, helps other participants in making games • Makes game about bullying: “The Right Choice” • Makes animation about bullying: “Prevent Bullying”
Charles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in making cartoons • Attends workshops through week 7 • Makes “Bullying Ball” animation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares stories of being bullied • Works independently on GoAnimate to learn about making cartoons and animations
Eddie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 years old • Makes many references to being hungry • Makes multiple games on Gamestar Mechanic • Attends all 10 workshop sessions • Does not have reliable computer at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares stories about seeing homeless people in community • Makes game about hunger: “Turkey Shoot” • Makes story for animation: “The Fisherman Who Fed the Homeless”
Jason	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attends workshops weeks 1, 2, and 3 • Makes multiple games on Gamestar Mechanic • Sees animal cruelty as a problem • Voices frustration about chaotic learning environment • Does not have reliable computer at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares that his brother is a soldier • Suggests making sad story about war to help cope with having brother at war • Identifies limitations of game-making platform for making games for civic engagement • Suggests ‘hacking’ Gamestar Mechanic

APPENDIX B

SETH'S STORY: PREVENT BULLYING

SETH'S STORY: PREVENT BULLYING

[Bell rings in crowded hallway, all students leave hallway except two people; one is larger and wearing a sports jersey, the other is shorter and wearing glasses]

[bully says] "Hey Nerd."

[victim says] "Not this guy again. What Jackson?"

"My name is Blade."

"Okay Blade, what?"

"Come here."

"Sooooo?" [bully pushes victim to ground] "WOOOAAHHHH!"

[victim falls to ground] "hunh? What happened?"

[bully laughs] "HAHAHAHAHA!!"

[school principal appears in scene at left of screen, watching the incident happen.]

[bully pushes victim to ground again] "WOOOAAHHHH!"

[bully laughs again] "HAHAHAHAHA!!"

[principal asks] "Is there a problem boys?"

[bully says] "Ummmm, no."

[victim says] [sniff] "He hit me." [sniff]

[principal says] "Jackson, please come with me." [principal walks bully to side room, then returns]

[principal says] "Don't worry Matt. Jackson won't be bothering you again."

[victim turns to face camera and says] "Please help prevent bullying across the U.S.A."

APPENDIX C

EDDIE'S STORY: THE FISHERMAN WHO FED THE HOMELESS

EDDIE'S STORY: THE FISHERMAN WHO FED THE HOMELESS

SCENE 1: MARKET PLACE

Narrator: There was a homeless man named Small Fry.

Smallfry: "Where am I?"

Narrator: He woke up on a beach with screaming children. He got up and walked two miles to the fish market to get a swordfish.

Smallfry: "Can I get a free swordfish?"

Narrator: Crabhead, the fish salesman said,

Crabhead: "No! There is no free fish!"

Narrator: But that didn't stop Small Fry. He walked over to Shark Bait, the fisherman, and asked him if he could have one free swordfish.

Smallfry: "Can I have one free swordfish?"

Sharkbait: "I would, but it's up to my boss."

Smallfry: "Who's your boss?"

Sharkbait: "Crabhead."

Smallfry: "That mean old man?"

Sharkbait: "If he said no, then I could get you a swordfish at sea."

Smallfry: "You would do that for me?"

Sharkbait: "Yep, any time, that mean old Crabhead can't tell me what to do with my boat."

Smallfry: "Thank you. Good bye."

SCENE 2: STORMY SEAS

[Sharkbait goes out to sea in his fishing boat to catch Smallfry a swordfish. After he leaves the harbor, a great wind starts and the skies darken. Sharkbait catches a swordfish as giant bolts of lightning shoot down from the sky. Sharks jump out of the water, but somehow Sharkbait manages to keep his swordfish and escape the storm.]

The winds die down and Sharkbait returns to the fish market with a swordfish for Smallfry.]

SCENE 3: RETURN FROM SEA

[Sharkbait steps off his boat with a swordfish, and brings it to Smallfry, handing it over]

Smallfry: "Thanks for this fish."

Sharkbait: "You're welcome."

Smallfry: "So, what are you going to do now?"

Sharkbait: "I'm going to stand up to my boss, right here, right now!"

Smallfry: "Okay, let's go."

[The two walk together to confront Crabhead at his shack]

Sharkbait: "Boss, I don't like you. You're mean and I'm not going to stand up for any of this crap that you put on me."

Crabhead: "Well, I still need a fisherman, and I didn't fire you."

Sharkbait: "Well I quit! These are my fish and I catch 'em. You don't do anything except stand around here and boss me around all day, so I quit! You're a horrible boss."

[Sharkbait leaves and finds Smallfry]

Smallfry: "So, did you stand up to your boss?"

Sharkbait: "Yep, I quit my job and now I'm going to start my own company."

Smallfry: "Guess what? Well on the way here walking, I saw a 'For Sale' company sign right by the ocean.

Sharkbait: "Let's go get it!"

[Sharkbait and Smallfry leave to purchase the new company]

Sharkbait to Smallfry: "Do you want to work for my company?"

Smallfry: "Oh thanks! Yeah, sure."

[Credits read: "Sharkbait and Smallfry work together to start their own fish store. The store gives away free fish for the homeless.]