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# Teens' Participatory Play: Digital Media Learning through Civic Engagement.

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# Teens' Participatory Play: Digital Media Learning through Civic Engagement.

## **Abstract**

While nearly 90 percent of adolescents have Internet access both inside and outside school,<sup>1</sup> an emerging problem is the lack of opportunities for teens to become involved in digital media projects that support teenagers' social, cultural, and political participation in the world. Even as some are troubled by the lack of young people's involvement in traditional civic activities such as voting,<sup>2</sup> others have seen civic engagement differently, drawing attention to teenagers' interest in projects that are more personally meaningful, such as volunteering, activism, or consumerism.<sup>3</sup> A new model of citizenship is taking shape in which young people use the affordances of the Internet to pursue interests through loosely based social networks.<sup>4</sup> Informed by a broad conception of civic engagement, projects such as World's Fair 2064 and Mouse offer the kind of participatory learning that can occur through the use of digital (and social) media. In both World's Fair 2064 and Mouse, young people use digital media to address pressing community problems with peers and trusted adults. Each project is explored in more detail below.

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Early Childhood Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Technology | Higher Education | Online and Distance Education | Secondary Education

## **Comments**

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## 15 Teen's Participatory Play: Digital Media Learning through Civic Engagement

Benjamin Gleason

### Introduction

While nearly 90 percent of adolescents have Internet access both inside and outside school,<sup>1</sup> an emerging problem is the lack of opportunities for teens to become involved in digital media projects that support teenagers' social, cultural, and political participation in the world. Even as some are troubled by the lack of young people's involvement in traditional civic activities such as voting,<sup>2</sup> others have seen civic engagement differently, drawing attention to teenagers' interest in projects that are more personally meaningful, such as volunteering, activism, or consumerism.<sup>3</sup> A new model of citizenship is taking shape in which young people use the affordances of the Internet to pursue interests through loosely based social networks.<sup>4</sup> Informed by a broad conception of civic engagement, projects such as World's Fair 2064 and Mouse offer the kind of participatory learning that can occur through the use of digital (and social) media. In both World's Fair 2064 and Mouse, young people use digital media to address pressing community problems with peers and trusted adults. Each project is explored in more detail below.

### Mouse

Mouse is an organization based in New York City designed to "empower underserved youth to learn, lead, and create with technology."<sup>5</sup> The primary objective of the Mouse programs is to train student participants to become technological experts. Since 2000, more than 23,000 students have participated in Mouse and, through their expertise, have served 1.8 million students. Mouse consists of two projects, Mouse Squad and Mouse Corps. The Mouse Squad project trains educators, who in turn train students at their schools to become digital media and technology experts. The educators

learn and pass on a number of skills, including how to remix videos using an open-access tool Mouse designed, create appealing websites, and develop new skills in areas such as robotics. By empowering underserved young people to become competent technological leaders while also supporting their academic goals, Mouse has advanced the creation of a national network of technology-focused teaching and learning. Meanwhile, for those with an advanced interest in design and technology, the Mouse Design League encourages young people to work alongside scientists, artists, engineers, computer scientists, and other technological experts as they create innovative projects. One current project, recently presented at the digital media and learning convention Emoti-Con, is an assistive technology product for artists with cerebral palsy. Named Omni Palette, the device allows artists with muscular challenges to swap paintbrushes and change paint. With the aid of a mechanical Arduino, an electronic open-source prototyping platform, the electronic palette encourages painters to continue their craft through assistive technology.

The key innovation of Mouse lies in creating a network of trained teen experts who use their technological expertise to provide a valuable service to the community. Mouse inverts the traditional model of education in which adults with knowledge attempt to transfer it to students by lecture. Mouse supports participatory, youth-led projects that develop the capacity of young people to address pressing community problems with a well-trained cadre of technological experts. Though educational technology has been a major priority for schools, as illustrated by the federal E-rate program, which funds hardware and software purchases, a major challenge has been maintaining technology in heavy-use areas such as schools.

Mouse has shown other community-based organizations and youth-serving networks how to build community capacity while providing necessary career development for underserved youth. However, the program also faces challenges. For instance, though Mouse's program evaluation demonstrated that more than 90 percent of its students gained valuable technology, communication, and problem-solving skills, the program also faces sustainability issues. Programs such as Mouse can be expensive and labor-intensive to implement. If Mouse is able to maintain diverse funding sources, staffing, and organizational capacity, it may be able to meet some of the challenges associated with running a community-focused organization.

The primary revolutionary aspect of Mouse lies in the scale of its outcomes. With 23,000 student participants, the organization was able to reach almost two million students. This suggests that the power of projects

like Mouse lies in their effect not only on the actual students who participate but also on groups, communities, and networks. The technological expertise that students gain will likely continue to develop the professional capacity of each community served by Mouse. The students, meanwhile, benefit from gaining lifelong technological competencies that are highly valued on the job market.

While Mouse seeks to train a cadre of talented young people to address New York City's pressing technological needs, across the city another program is building awareness about the dangers of climate change. The next section details that program's story.

### World's Fair 2064

The goal of World's Fair 2064, an educational and visionary project contemplating the look of a 2064 world fair in New York's Flushing Meadows Corona Park and comparing it with the current status quo, is to facilitate creative activism through community service projects based on scientific issues.<sup>6</sup> Led by the Queens (New York) Zoo, the project was devised as a way to teach high school students about climate change while building on students' unique resources, such as knowledge of community, their invention of characters, and their developing scientific knowledge. The World's Fair 2064 project uses an innovative approach known as *transmedia storytelling* to tell the story of a community's response to proposed urban redevelopment.

For instance, to tell the story of climate change, student participants created a fictitious scenario drawing attention to the central role of the park in the community. The group imagined the effects of a 2064 proposal to raze Flushing Meadows Corona Park and replace it with high-rise condominiums, luxury retail outlets, and a sports complex. Flushing Meadows Corona Park, created for the 1964 New York World's Fair, is a much-loved home to city residents, different varieties of wildlife (including many kinds of birds and farm animals), and large recreational spaces. One of the characters created by the young people is Perry Donald, an avid birdwatcher, who, the students decided, would spearhead the opposition to razing the park. Through the use of different media—photographs, video, artwork—in conjunction with social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, World's Fair 2064 encourages young people to participate in the movement against the redevelopment. Moreover, as a way to bridge the fictive, future scenario and participants' lived experiences, World's Fair 2064 organizes real-life bird counts that illustrate the effects of destroying a large, urban

park. The falling numbers of birds suggest the local consequences of a global problem.

The key innovation of World's Fair 2064 is using the most popular social media space with teenagers, Facebook, to detail the negative consequences of eliminating an important park in New York City. And because issues are handled through story format, young people can draw on their creativity and capacity to make large, complex stories (e.g., about climate change) accessible and engaging. Through transmedia storytelling, young people can create captivating learning experiences that help develop their scientific knowledge, technological expertise, and communicative competence.

World's Fair 2064 in action further suggests the powerful relationships that can form as young people use social media to address a critical issue such as climate change: youth involved in the program worked alongside adult mentors, including technology experts, wildlife biologists, and artists, to create multimedia stories that demonstrate their science learning. Though Donald Perry and his fellow activists are fictitious, the factors affecting the real and imagined park are very much the same: climate change will have a serious effect on New York City, affecting people, wildlife, businesses, and beyond. Framing the story of climate change as a local issue allows New Yorkers to see how the loss of Corona Park would lead to immediate follow-on consequences, such as the loss of birds and other wildlife.

Both World's Fair 2064 and Mouse are part of a larger educational approach, called *connected learning*, that builds on young people's particular interests and desires to learn with peers to support economic, social, or political participation.<sup>7</sup> Connected learning projects rely on digital media to lower barriers to participation, offer social supports for learning, and develop identities through the use of online literacy practices such as reading and writing. These projects seem to offer a bridge between youth-initiated activities and interests, such as social media activities, and traditionally defined models of civic engagement, such as community service, voting, and participation in the political process. Henry Jenkins, a scholar of new media and popular culture, has written extensively on how technological, social, and cultural changes support young people's participation in the world around them.<sup>8</sup> As young people post original artwork, photography, or stories online using digital media, Jenkins argues, they gain valuable technological, social, political, and artistic skills that enable community participation. This kind of participation in a peer-driven, low-stakes environment (in contrast to many formal classroom settings) may help develop young people's abilities to use multiple forms of media to tell stories, build

worlds, become activists, and represent themselves. Interestingly, Jenkins noted that participation in these digital cultures is not limited to white, suburban males; 40 percent of urban young people surveyed were considered media creators (versus 28 percent of suburban youth), and 27 percent of older girls are involved in participatory activities (versus 17 percent of boys).<sup>9</sup>

While a number of benefits result from these types of learning spaces, there are particular limitations as well. First, while the learning outcomes that occur are exciting, they require significant investment of time, labor, and funding to achieve the sort of high-quality results seen with World's Fair 2064. Though these constraints are significant, fortunately, they are usually distributed among multiple stakeholders, such as learning organizations, community members, adult volunteers, and students. Second, the current educational model offers significant barriers to promoting, recognizing, and validating the learning that happens in this type of environment. While science researchers have found that students typically increase their content knowledge through connected learning projects of this sort,<sup>10</sup> schools may be hesitant to take part in innovative projects. Third, these types of connected learning projects often require the development of new assessment models to evaluate the learning-related outcomes. These challenges, while not insurmountable, draw attention to the capacity of the community (including schools) to develop resources to respond to them.

### Recommendations for Policy and Pedagogy

Mouse and World's Fair 2064 model ways in which young people can develop the practices of civic engagement through participatory play. Mouse trains young people to become technological experts in their school community, empowering them to solve technical computing problems; World's Fair 2064 develops the capacity of young people to tell imaginative, multimedia stories about climate change. Both programs encourage youth to transform themselves and their communities by using interactive digital media to build capacity, create powerful narratives, and connect with peers and adult mentors. One link between the projects is an element of play: young people have fun as they take part in activities that serve their communities.

To fully realize the transformative power of digital media to support civic engagement, schools, public libraries, and after-school programs should reverse existing bans on (social) media use, as New York City has done recently. Though schools face particular pressures toward standardized

education in a milieu of neoliberal, corporate education reform, they can also be a space of tremendous opportunity to develop educational innovation. Schools serve as an important bastion of democracy (e.g., through educating all students, including those marginalized in larger society; by providing nutrition; and by providing access to mental and reproductive health services) and nurture within the ecology of public participation. As *World's Fair 2064* and *Mouse* show, the use of social media may encourage students to develop important literacy, technological, and artistic competencies. As students develop engaging narratives about the negative consequences of critical global events such as climate change, they add much-needed voices to a conversation often dominated by adults. Thus, a relatively modest policy recommendation has the potential to open up important avenues for learning, participatory play, and community change.

Once the ban on social media use in schools is lifted, teachers and students should take advantage of opportunities to develop collaboration, creativity, and technological expertise through the use of low-cost or free platforms. In this model, exemplified by *Mouse*, students are seen not as empty vessels that require knowledge to be poured in but as competent experts who can train peers, teachers, and community members in appropriate uses of technology. Empowering students to plan, lead, and participate in learning opportunities will go a long way toward the development of vibrant educational communities. This kind of collaboration counteracts the tendency of schools to focus on autonomous, individual learners.

Digital media can be integrated into schools relatively easily. Rather than replacing or detracting from traditional academic curricula, digital media complement and deepen opportunities for learning. For example, students tasked with writing a persuasive composition, a common requirement in many public schools, might use digital media to create a brief video about the role of justice and equality in their community. The traditional literacy skills of persuasive writing are complemented with the digital media skills of video creation and editing, while the entire project demands negotiation, problem solving, and playfulness.

To that end, teachers, after-school program coordinators, community members, and administrators should develop meaningful curricula that speak to young people's need for creative, artistic practices. A promising educational innovation is the inclusion of the arts in traditional "hard science" practices. These so-called STEAM initiatives use arts to develop and nurture creativity, collaboration, and cross-disciplinary thinking. Like *World's Fair 2064*, these projects rely on the power of the arts to tell valuable stories through music, photography, video, dance, and sound. Using

art acknowledges our humanity and the importance of artistic creation to build community and strengthen ourselves.

Finally, the use of digital media can serve as a meaningful lever to get young people involved in community participation. By encouraging playful, humane learning opportunities—such as becoming a tech expert or using video to tell the story of a local park—young people follow their interests to facilitate positive societal change.

### Notes

1. See Mary Madden et al., "Teens and Technology 2013," Pew Internet & America Life Project (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, March 13, 2013), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/03/13/teens-and-technology-2013/>.
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
3. See W. Lance Bennett, *Civic Learning in Changing Democracies: Challenges for Citizenship and Civic Education* (London: Routledge, 2007).
4. W. Lance Bennett, Chris Wells, and Deen G. Freelon, "Communicating Civic Engagement: Contrasting Models of Citizenship in the Youth Web Sphere," *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 5 (2011): 835–856, <http://dfreelon.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/bennettwellsfreelon2011.pdf>.
5. Available at <http://mouse.org>.
6. Available at <http://worldsfair2064.wordpress.com>.
7. Mizuko Ito et al., *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design* (Irving, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2013), [http://dmlhub.net/wp-content/uploads/files/Connected\\_Learning\\_report.pdf](http://dmlhub.net/wp-content/uploads/files/Connected_Learning_report.pdf).
8. Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
9. Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, "Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create," in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, ed. Stephen J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171–195.
10. Angela Calabrese Barton et al., "Crafting a Future in Science: Tracing Middle School Girls' Identity Work over Time and Space," *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 1 (2012): 37–75, doi:0002831212458142.

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