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"So Please Stop, Thank You": Girls Online.

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Many people have noticed the gender split on Usenet newsgroups, observing that the vast majority of people posting messages are men. It has been informally estimated that less than ten percent of the public messages are written by women. This is much smaller than one would expect, given that an estimated 36 percent of Internet - accesing accounts belong to women (1). Many women have allowed their voices to be drowned out, and both men and women have left the net entirely when they've become disgusted with flaming and other obnoxious behavior. It seems that on the net you have to either "put up or shut up" - is there truly no other option?

There might be. When working with children on a local network, I found that the girls did not avoid writing public messages. In fact, although there were only a few more girls in my project than there were boys, the girls wrote 58 percent of the messages. The girls who received negative responses did not back off, but held their own. Why were these girls so different from their adult counterparts?

Questions of representation became more important to me when I began designing an online environment for children to use in school. I wanted to design a space that would allow equal access to all the children involved. What could I do to provide a space that any children could use comfortably? I decided to use a computer - based newsgroup environment similar to Usenet, without any private email, and observe the children's behavior.

In the Classroom

In the spring of 1994, introduced NewsMaker, a software system written by Mark Kortekaas which I helped design (2), to three classrooms of fifth-grade students and two of fourth- graders. Because I believe that children learn by sharing their ideas about topics that interest them, I set up a few groups, but told the children they could start new topics at will.

The students could use NewsMaker to read, write and modify articles, but had no assigned newsgroup projects. Students in one advanced-work fifth-grade class were told they could use the network to ask questions about their current computer-based assignment, which was to design and create educational video games to teach younger students about the ocean (3). The other advanced-work fifth-grade class could be online consultants for the new designers, since they had already done similar projects.

Although the children posted many kinds of messages to their newsgroups, most didn't use the system to hold conversations. The children who did were those designing and programming educational video games about

the ocean. As mentioned, they got help from a second class, called the consultants, who had done a similar project.

These children interacted online over a period of four months. Their experiences discussing their school projects show what can happen when children are given the ability to talk freely online about things that are important to them. The story of one girl in particular demonstrates different ways the children interacted and how their interactions changed over time.

Renee's Game

Renee was one of the game designers. A quiet girl, she enjoyed both working on the computers and giggling with her friends when she was alone with them. She wanted to create a game in which the player would control a fish, guiding it to the pots of gold that would reveal facts about the ocean. Anytime the fish crossed one of the barriers she created, the player would be asked a question about the ocean. In addition, she wanted to have a whale that could chase the fish. It would be made out of two shapes (to make it larger than the fish) and controlled either by the computer or by another , depending on programmatic constraints. Of course, Renee didn't have the entire design set out on the first day; she, like most of the children, had plans that modified over time.

First Questions

On the first day of the game design project, a girl named Whitney had a question for everyone, so I showed her how to use NewsMaker to post it. When Renee had a question the next day, Whitney showed her how to use the system. Renee wrote:

March 15, 1994.
shapes
How do you make two shapes move like one?(4).

She did not sign this message, but sine all messages had their author's name in the header, it was obvious who had written it. That day she received two replies from consultants (the other fifth-grades who had previously done a similar project). Suzanne's response read simply:

RENAE I DO NOT KNOW (5).

Being used to Usenet conventions, I was surprised to read a message that said only "I don't know"; after all, the questions in a newsgroup are not generally directed to particular people, so what does it matter if one reader doesn't know the answer? This was only one of several such messages, many of which also included a possible alternative solution. In interviews I conducted prior to this project, several children had told me that they were uncomfortable when one of their friends asked them something they didn't know: it seemed as if they would "look stupid" if they admitted ignorance. In this online setting, however, it seemed to be a way for children to indicate that they wanted to help, but were unable to.

Ken, a rather loud, quick consultant, also answered Renee's question. This was another surprise, since it meant a boy was answering a girl's question. I had observed Ken's class during their computer time and noticed that boys would talk only to boys and girls would talk only to girls: I never saw a boy asking a girl a question or vice versa. Ken gave a matter-of-fact response that seemed to answer Renee's question.

Apparently it did not provide the information Renee wanted, however, because on the next day of the project, she posted this:

March 18, 1994
Following shapes
How do you make one shape fallow another? One shape moving by the arrow or letter keys, the other moving by computer, following the other shapes?
Renee

Albert's reply was yet another type of answer: a message that informed the questioner that someone else might have the answer:

Talk to Jorge. You two are in the same boat. (Pardon the pun)
Albert

Albert, a small and quiet boy, was the acknowledged computer expert in the classroom; he became very active outline. Although he could probably have answered the question directly, as he did with many others, in this case he chose to redirect the questioner. This was probably more efficient; after all, Jorge had (with help) just solved a similar problem. Lisa also answered the question; since she was a good friend of Renee's, her sharp reply was somewhat surprising:

Renee, for the first thing you spelled follow wrong, for the second thing you do it by attaching the shapes, simple, ask me for details at lunch.
Lisa.

This was the first "spelling flame" I noticed, although later in the project there were a few more. (It was not the typical type of spelling flame accepted on Usenet, as it was not typed perfectly, but it certainly was a star. No one responded with a flame for Lisa's typing.) I believe there were at least two reasons for Lisa's abrupt manner: First, she was generally rather tactless, and second, she and Renee had a comfortable friendship in which criticism could be taken as an attempt to help. Lisa's online communication was not particularly clear; her teacher said she often didn't take the time to write clearly in other settings either.

Other students gave Renne more details in posts they wrote during the next session. Unfortunately, they did not seem to address the question to Renee's satisfaction. Tina was a new student in the consultant's classroom; a tall girl who loved to dance and to laugh, she seemed to want to help even though she didn't have much experience. She wrote:

WELL YOU COULD USE YOUR FOUR TURTLES, THEN SEE WHAT HAPPENS. TINA H-307

When I read this, and other messages like it, I was surprised; if these children had been asked, "How do I build a treehouse"? would they have said, "Use some boards and see what happens"? Renne did not seen to take offense, but replied by restating her question more clearly. Her reply demonstrated a type of reasoning I considered most important during this project: Instead of assuming that the respondent was stupid, or just "not getting it", some students would realize that what they themselves had written was unclear.

In real life it is very common for children of this age to assume that they are not at fault if someone doesn't understands their words. There is no need for them to clarify what they said; after all, they already explained it once, so the other guy must just be stupid. In their minds they have explained it; because they cannot review their verbal communication, all they have to go on is what they think they said.

In this online environment, however, children could go back and see what they had actually said. This happened many times during the project, and several were surprised to see what they had really typed. I heard children say, "Oh, my question wasn't clear!" to others or just to themselves; another comment made was "I should've explained that I'd already tried that!".

Renee asked another question on the third day of the project:

How do you make words appear on the screen when you reach a certain point of the screen or you reach a shape that is on the screen?
Renee

Albert simply suggested she try a particular command. Several times during the project, Albert commented that giving someone a complete answer would not really help, since the person might just copy it and not learn anything. Other students didn't feel as strongly about this issue. Three consultants all answered in more explicit ways.

Renee's classmate Carrie, on the other hand, apparently took exception to Renee's question; she wrote:

RENEE I DON'T MEAN TO BE RUDE BUT YOU'RE ACTING DUMB AND YOU'RE NOT THINKING!!!!!!!! GO TO YOU'RE TIME LINE AND COPY YOU'RE PRECEDURE THAT DOES

THAT!!!!!!!!
UN NAMED

The capitalization was probably a Caps-Lock accident rather than an attempt at shouting, but the message was still quite pointed. It was also interesting to see that Carrie signed the message "UN NAMED" rather just leaving her signature off. Her name would have been in the message header in either case, but writing "UN NAMED" indicated to me she wanted to comment anonymously, perhaps because she didn't want to be flamed back.

Carrie apparently later decided she shouldn't have criticized Renee so strongly, since at the beginning of the next session she repeatedly tried to delete the messages that included her comments.

Uncertainty in Renne's Answers to Others

While Renee asked several questions, she replied to quite a few as well. Many of her answers sounded as if they were written by a stereotypically uncertain young girl. During the session in which Renee posted her second and third question, Albert wrote:

Does anyone know how to reverse a shape: make the black part white, and the white part black?
Albert

Lisa replied simply "no", but Renee realized there was an ambiguity in the question. Instead of assuming she knew which question Albert meant, she responded by asking for clarification. After Albert replied, Renee suggested a solution:

Can't you just click space on all of the blocks in the square and then make the picture by clicking again? Then the black or background would be white and the picture or the white would be black?
Renee

This uncertainly was found more often in posts by girls than in those by the boys. It could be that Renee used it in this case because she was giving advice to the class's "computer expert", but she also seemed hesitant when answering a question by a girl who was not considered authority:

Maybe you could color the box black as if you were writing words. I'm not sure if it will work, but it might.
Renee

Renee's style was even more apologetic in the following response to a question about musical tones:

I know this probably sounds strange, but do you mean higher than tone h, because there is none. But if you want tone a, b, c, d, e, f or g, then there is a procedure in the box that has cards that has things you can do on the computer. I'm sorry I don't know the exact answer right off hand, but go look. You might find it!

I do not want in suggest that all of Renee's statements were uncertain or apologetic, bet several of them were. In any case, it was heartening to me to see that not only did Renee ask questions publicly, but she also spent time answering her classmates's questions in a constructive and supportive manner.

More than Tech-Talk

Although most of the questions the children asked online concerned strictly issues, some children discussed the topics of their games and others talked about ways to make their games educational. Several weeks into her project, Lisa addressed a question about the style of her game to Renee. Renee's response was quite authoritative, even after the computer expert Albert had replied (6):

April 29, 1994 RE:RE: FOR RENEE

>>RENEE, WHAT DO YOU DO ON YOUR GAME WHEN SOMEONE
>GETS AN ANSWER WRONG?
>>
>How about printing on the screen, "Wrong!"
>

>Albert
>
I agree with Albert, say "wrong". But you should also explain the correct answer, and sometimes put "wrong" in a funner way. For example, put nope, uh-uh, think again, etc. Make it fun to be wrong!
Renee

Very few messages were directed to a certain person as this one was, and, as in this case, other students seemed to ignore the direction an answer anyway. Rather than contradicting Albert's suggestion or ignoring him as annoying interloper, however, Renee responded in a way which incorporated his comment. It is also interesting to note that Lisa asked Renee a question online, rather than doing so in person, even though they are friends in the same classroom.

Another nontechnical topic that generated discussion was raised by a thoughtful girl named Tisha. She wrote:

April 29, 1994
What do you think?
Do you think that by asking trick questions you are teaching someone else?
tell me what you think
Tisha

I was very glad to see the children asking for opinions or nontechnical aspects of their programs; most traditional school settings don't seem to welcome children's discussions of their personal pedagogical view points. Renee answered Tisha during the next session:

I think that it depends on the trick question. Can you give an example? I think it might just confuse people with the correct answer, but give an example.
Renee

A week later, after a consultant named Kim answered, Renee responded again:

May 10, 1994.
RE:RE: what do you think?

>>Do you think that by asking trick questions you are
>>teaching someone else?
>>tell me what you think
>>Tisha
>
>I THINK THAT IF YOU HAVE TRICK QUESTIONS AND SOMEBODY
>IS TRYING TO ANSWER IT WOULDN'T BE RIGHT BECAUSE THEY
>ARE TRYING THEIR BEST TO ANSWER THE QUESTION AND THEN
>THEY'LL NEVER KNOW WHAT IT WOULD BE. SO I THINK THAT
>TRICK QUESTIONS DO NOT TEACH SOMEBODY A LESSON.
>THAT'S MY OPINION.
>
>KIM E.
>
I think that you should have trick questions to add fun to your game. I think that it would be fun for somebody to find out that there is a trick question. It might make them think about the answers more carefully if you tell them before they start playing the game. But just be sure to tell them whether they chose the right answer, otherwise it might confuse them, and that wouldn't be good!
Renee

These girls along with the other three who responded were clearly focusing on the educational aspects of their games and paying attention to how the younger children would feel and what they would learn while playing the games. No boys wrote on this topic, perhaps because they were more focused on finishing their games than on helping other students by this point. Tisha and Renee had a conversation about trick questions in person after the above messages; Tisha told me she wanted to talk to Renee about it (even though weren't friends) because Renee had asked her for examples.

Over time, the style of Renee's messages seemed to change. The ideas in her later messages were more clearly expressed than those in the early ones, and she gave more context for her questions. I had though the children might stop using the online system when their questions became more complex, but was not always the case. Renee's game progressed much as her messages did. She was able to work out her problems and produce a complete game that other children liked. Her game was the only two-player game in the class; she made a whale which a second player could use to chase the first player's fish. If the whale was able to catch the fish, the game ended, even if all the pots of gold had not been retrieved.

Participation by Gender: Is it just Renee?

Given only the messages quoted above, it would seem that the girls in this project wrote much more than the boys did. Would the story be different if I had chosen another child? Certainly. Does this story present an overly biased picture? I don" believe it does.

Although Renee did write a high number of messages compared to the average for her class (she wrote twenty-three and the average was twelve), she was not he most prolific poster. For example, Albert wrote forty-one messages, Emilie authored thirty-one, Stephan twenty-three, Carrie twenty-two and Lisa twenty.

Of the 235 messages written by the twenty game designers, 138 of them were by girls. That means almost 59 percent of the messages were written by the ten female class members. There were ten girls and eight boys in the consultants' class; eighty-six messages were from girls, and sixty-six from boys. This class was more balanced (female consultants wrote an average of 8.6 messages each, and the boys 8.25), but the girls still wrote more. These few statistics show that girls participated in this online environment at least as much as the boys did, and in many cases, more than the boys.

Duh! Rudeness Online

Most of the time, neither boys nor girls were rude in their online messages. Although there were some striking exceptions, none of these messages approached the nastiness of common Usenet flames. The message that Carrie wrote and then tried to delete was the strongest message any of the girls wrote. There were also a few blunt ones, such as Emilie's "Renee, just go to your timeline!", but these weren't considered rude by many children. For example, Ken sent this message in response to a question Carrie had posted:

March 15, 1994
RE: Shapes
>How do you make a round circle using two shapes?
>
Make a semi-circle on one shape and another semi-circle on the other. DUH!!!

Don, another consultant, chimed in "Yeah!" Carrie replied by writing the only message from a girl that said "duh!" to someone:

Don I tried that and it made a skinny oval DUH!!!
CARRIE

I was glade to see that Carrie didn't just back off and consider her question stupid because of the responses she received in public from these boys. Some of the designers, told each other these boys' messages were rude; I didn't hear anyone say they thought Carrie's response was also rude. Although four of the boys sent this kind of message very early in the project, the others were generally helpful and non offensive. One of the girls, a designer, fell strongly enough about rude messages that she wrote this:

March 21, 1994
Rude!
I think that some of the answers that are given are rude and impolite NewsMaker is not a place to talk about what happens during the day, it is a place to ask questions and get answers. Some of the answers that we are geting are rude and the people that write them should stop. People should also stop answering question impolitely. I think that if someone asks a question people should not answer the question if they have nothing to say. They should also not end the question writing something like "Duh!" they should answer it with

something like "And that is how you do it". So please, stop, thank you.
Whitney

Three girls responded to this post, agreeing with Whitney. The only boy to reply was Ken , who only typed lines of random characters. He had posted various derogatory comments in other groups, as well as nonsense such as this, but none of his remarks were answered, and those to whom they were addressed continued to participate. Although Ken was certainly not supportive of Whitney's message, he didn't flame any of the girls involved, nor did he ever write "duh!" again. As a matter of fact, none of the children ever wrote "duh!" or anything similar in their messages after Whitney's post.

Emilie dealt with the "duh!" responses to her questions in a different way. This girls didn't take smart talk in person without some response, and she didn't online either. She posted this question initially:

DOES ANYBODY KNOW HOW TO MAKE DIFFERENT MUSIC THAN TONE C, TONE B...EMILIE B.

Two of the mate designers answered her the same day. Mark stated:

Nooooooooooooooooooo! Duh!

And Stephan wrote:

Nope!! You can't. DDDDUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Emilie did not respond to their messages directly, but immediately put up a second question on the same topic:

(STEPHAN + MARK DON'T ANSWER THIS)
DOES ANYBODY KNOW HOW TO MAKE MUSIC ON THE COMPUTER???????????????

There was no way for Emilie to automatically disregard messages by certain people (other systems have "kill files" and "bozo filters" that allow users to hide messages by particular authors, but no such mechanism was available to the children), but she found her own way to remain a participant without flaming back.

Breaking some Stereotypes

There are many stereotypes about males and females that one might have expected in this setting: for example, boys are often rude, girls are more social, children only help their friends, girls get upset by obnoxious behavior and withdraw... the list goes on and on.

I was glad to see that many of these stereotypes were broken in this online environment; the children did not necessarily act in ways that simple stereotypes would have predicted. The boys were generally helpful, both to other boys and to girls; only occasionally did they write anything rude. The girls did pay attention to social aspects of being online, even to the point of writing about types of behavior that they considered appropriate, but they did not confine themselves to the social sphere; they also asked and answered technical questions in the public forum. Both boys and girls answered questions of children of both genders, whether or not they were friends. Many children were willing to admit when they didn't have an answer, and generally suggested alternative questions or possible answers. And girls did not simply withdraw when they received or read rude messages.

Other aspects of the children's interactions were also striking. For example, girls and boys answered about the same number of question in both classrooms; however the girls were more likely to qualify their answers, while the boys were more direct. The girls more often used stereotypically feminine forms of writing, making suggestions and employing apologetic tones. Female designers asked twice as many questions as their male counterparts did, and while the female consultants asked a total of four questions, none of the male consultants asked a question. Perhaps some boys felt they would lose face by asking questions, but the girls seemed to view asking questions as a social activity rather than an admittance of ignorance.

My original question asked if I would be able to provide a space that would not exclude any children because of their gender, ethnic group, elique or ability level. I also wanted to have a space where the children would

be free to express themselves on important topics not typically supported in dchools. I believe that for these children I was able to reach these goals.

The context of the children's communication was critical to the sucess of the project: The fact that the game designers were each creating something that was personally important and that they would be able to share with others in the school meant that each one had a personal interest in seeing their communication succeed (7).

The public nature of all messages may well have caused many children to think twice before writing anything offensive. A child who posted a flame might have been flamed in return -and not only by the child he or she flamed, but by other members of the community. Although teachers were not major participants in the project, it was clear that they could read any of the messages. In addition, the messages were not anonymous, and the students probably realized there could be negative consequences for unacceptable behavior. Since this network was local to the school, all of the children on it could locate anyone who had written a message. Because the author´s real name appeared with every message, everyone else knew who each author was and could find him or her in person. This could be very positive, as in the case where Tisha and Renee talked in person after exchanging messages online, but it could also mean that if a message was offensive, other children could talk to the author in person about it.

Another aspect of the network being in a common physical community was that children may have taken others' real-life personalities into account when reading their messages. For example, Renee might have been offended by Lisa's spelling flame message if she hadn't known what there were real repercussions of the messages.

Even given all of the above considerations, it still may seem surprising that boys and girls used the system in similar ways. Many people think of men and women as having vastly different interactional styles online. Some of the stereotypical behavior did exist in my project, but many of the children went far beyond what might be considered gender boundaries on the net. And the gender participation levels were clearly different from those on Usenet.

I believe that part of the reason for this happy occurrence was that all of the children started using the system at about the same time, and at the same age. If the boys had been online weeks before the girls were, it could have felt like a boys' activity and the girls may have acted differently -and vice versa. Of course, as we know, most of the early Usenet participants were male.

If the children had been a few years older, entering the crisis time of adolescence, their experiences may have been vastly different. Psychologists who have studied children as they become adolescents have found that girls seem to be more strongly affected by adolescence than the boys are (8). Perhaps the girls in my project wouldn't have participated as freely as they did if they had been dealing with the new set of social expectations and insecurities brought on by adolescence.

There are many uncertainties in any project like this, and the reason for the children's particular interactions may never be entirely clear. The important point to me is that all the children were involved; neither girls nor boys let others chase them off. All of the children seemed to want to participate in some way.

Will it be Different for Them

Will these children 's online experiences at school affect their experience when they jump out onto the net? What could, or will, they and others like them do to change Usenet?

If these children had started their online experiences with Usenet itself, rather than the local Usenet-style system in the school, I believe they would have acted much differently. For example, they would have seen flame wars and learned that rudeness is so common as to be acceptable. By giving them a local system , I provided a way for them to determine what their online community would be like, rather than requiring them to learn some other people's standards.

Now what that they have been able to make that choice and see one type of community, what will they think about the net? The optimistic side of me likes to imagine that with an influx of students who have used local networks in ways I describe, the net will change: The percentage of obnoxious flames will go down as more

of these children join; they will know they don't have to shut up to avoid being made targets; and they will tell those who are rude that their behavior is inappropriate. And the flamers will step back and think about what they are writing and cease their bullying ways.

However, after reading a nasty flame, or getting offensive email from some guy. I have never heard of, I am more likely to think that newcomers who enjoy being offensive will take one look at the net and feel it is a place where they can be as rude as they want without any consequences. Those who don't like such behavior will quickly learn that they can't avoid it and quietly bow out.

After the experiences Renee and her schoolmates have had, I would hope that they wouldn't just give in to the flamers. Although messages such as Whitney's might have no effect on the Usenet community itself, because of its history, there are alternatives such as Emilie's -ignoring the flames and those who write them. These children know that those who post offensive messages don't have to do so to get their point across, and will not, one would hope , let rudeness affect their own actions.

The children I worked with have demonstrated that it is possible to have online discussion groups that are balanced across such lines as gender, race and academic ability - and that the online world is not inherently a hostile one.

ENDNOTES

1.John Quarterman of Matrix Information and Directory Services, based on a survey in December 1994 which showed that 36 percent of Internet-accessing accounts were owned by women. Cited in Elizabeth Weise, "How Big Is It?" The Associated Press, 12 May 1995.
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2.Mark L. Kortekaas, "News and Education: Creation of the Classroom Chronicle" (Master's thesis, MIT Media Arts and Sciences Program, 1994).
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3.For more information about game design projects, see: Yasmin B. Kafai, *Minds in Play: Computer Game Design as a Context for Children's Learning* (Hillsdale, ,N.J.: Lawrence Eribaum Associates, 1995). More information about this project in particular can be found in: Michele Evard, "A Community of Designers: Learning through Exchanging Questions and Answers", in *Constructionism in Practice: Designing, Thinking and Learning in a Digital World*, eds. Y. Kafai and M. Resnick (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Eribaum Associates, 1996).
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4.Although all of the children's names have been changed, every message I quote is otherwise exactly as the student typed it.
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5.As you can see, the children sometimes used all capitals; I believe this was because of their lack of typing skills rather than any desire to shout. Writing was difficult for many of them, and no one tried to force the children to make each message picture-perfect.
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6."RE:" in the header of a message indicates that the message is a response or reply to a message with the same title. Thus the double RE: here indicates that Renee is responding to Albert's response to the message entitled "FOR RENEE". The >> symbols precede quoted lines.
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7.This theory is explained in more detail in Seymour Papert, *The Children's Machine*. (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
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8.For example, Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons and Trudy J. Hanmer, eds. *Making Connections* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).
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