Designing Digital Experiences for Positive Youth Development

From Playpen to Playground

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CHAPTER 3

Wireless Hangouts vs. A Palace in Time During High School

This chapter focuses on the teen years of high school. By this age, young people are more interested in the act of getting together than the space in which they do so. Hanging out is a metaphor for spending time together, regardless of the location. The ubiquitous nature of wireless communication makes this possible. The metaphor of “wireless hangouts” captures adolescents’ overwhelming need to be with others. However, this need is tied not to a physical space but to time. Teens want to spend times with other teens, not only because they enjoy it but also because being with others is a way to find out who they are themselves. This need to socialize responds to the major developmental milestone of the adolescent identified by Erikson, identity exploration. It doesn't happen in a social vacuum but, rather, in a constant exchange with others. The wireless hangout is a no place metaphor. However, wireless hangouts do not explicitly support purposeful identity exploration. Therefore, in this chapter I juxtapose the metaphor of “wireless hangout” to the one of a “palace in time,” another “no place” metaphor coined by the Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951) for describing the Sabbath. The Sabbath, the seventh day, is a palace in time for the Jewish people. It is a palace in time for identity. According to Heschel, it is the Sabbath that has kept the Jews as a people over so many generations, as opposed to the Jews having kept the Sabbath. Later in this section I will expand on this choice of metaphor, but for now it is enough to understand that, while wireless hangouts are important in adolescents’ lives, some of those immersive experiences can become a palace in time to support their major developmental challenge: to quest for identity.

This generation of teenagers can meet online anytime and anywhere. However, today’s teens struggle with issues of identity as much as
past generations. Adolescence is a time to form a sense of individuality, to become aware of personal strengths and weaknesses. Teenagers start to realize that they can control their destinies but that they first need to define themselves and their goals. They are hungry for a sense of purpose in life, and they are likely to enroll in and support social causes.

According to Erikson (1963, 1982), adolescents experience identity vs. role confusion. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, they need to explore the question “Who am I?” while pondering the multiple roles they could play in the adult world. Adolescents know that the decisions they make now might have an impact on their future. They want to take their place in society, either by finding more or less conventional roles or by challenging established ways. At the same time, they need to find a sense of purpose, a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and of consequence to the world (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003).

Think of a 16 year old. He is studying hard because he wants to have good grades. Although he doesn’t talk about it, he worries about college. After school, he plays in a band with other kids in the neighborhood. He spends hours practicing in basements. He has a favorite rock star and posters of him all over his room. Through his church, he volunteers tutoring inner-city children who are struggling in math. He is active in his school council and has made several proposals for changing school rules. During the summer, he works some weeks as a youth counselor at a summer camp and other weeks at a car wash. He is exploring different roles and ways of being. He gets into arguments with his parents, and he rebels against their worldviews. He thinks he knows it all, and he has the energy and conviction to change the world.

In the process of exploring identity, adolescents may experience role confusion, mixed ideas and feelings about different ways to be and to fit in society. A successful resolution of the tension identity vs. role confusion leads to the virtue of fidelity. Erikson defines it as the ability to sustain loyalties despite value systems that might be confusing and contradictory. Once a person has explored different ways of being and “what if” possibilities and has struggled with the confusion of belonging to multiple communities, she may reach a point when she feels that she has found herself. She has an emotional and deep awareness of who she is. She is able to adhere to her values, no matter how they might be challenged. In turn, this reinforces a continuing sense of identity.

Adolescence is characterized by the tension between differentiation and identification: the need to find boundaries between self and others, and the need for integration into a major whole consisting of family, culture, and society. Erikson talks about adolescence as a psychological
moratorium, a "time out" when one can suspend decisions concerning long-term commitments and gain new experiences, encounter adventures, and experiment with multiple roles.

Sherry Turkle (1995), a psychoanalytically trained psychologist and sociologist, a professor at MIT, and a pioneer in studying people's personal relationship with technology, applied Erikson's concept of moratorium to the study of how adolescents use online environments as a social laboratory for experimenting with how the self is constructed and reconstructed in postmodern life. The pioneering work of Turkle has shown that technology serves to explore concepts of self as adolescents "cycle through" their own identities through playful experimentation.

Virtual worlds, among other online environments, may serve as spaces for moratorium. For example, the Habbo world (http://www.habbo.com/) is popular among adolescents. Habbo uses the metaphor of a hotel in which youth can meet others to play games and have fun. Users join this colorful, multidimensional virtual community and game environment by creating an online character or avatar called a Habbo (Beals, 2011). Users can design their avatars and their rooms and use furniture that can be purchased from a catalog. There is a code of conduct, called the "Habbo Way," that includes rules that users should adhere to, including, for example, not giving out passwords, not using hate speech, not telling people information about their location in real life, and not acting out violent acts. Habbo, along with other popular online environments, from virtual worlds to social networks, is an example of a wireless hangout for teenagers.

The metaphor of "wireless hangouts" captures adolescents' overwhelming need to explore who they are. This need is not tied to a physical space. The wireless hangout is a "no-place" metaphor. Wireless hangouts are ubiquitous and popular among teenagers. However, they do not explicitly support purposeful identity exploration. In this chapter I juxtapose the metaphor of "wireless hangout" to the one of a "palace in time," coined by Heschel (1951) for describing the Sabbath. The Jewish tradition provides an interesting metaphor for thinking about what it means to explore identity, not casually in a wireless hangout but purposefully across time in a "no space."

Back in 1998, when first thinking about how to design virtual worlds to promote identity exploration, one image came to my mind: the Jewish Sabbath. According to Heschel, the seventh day belongs to the realm of time, as opposed to the realm of space. The Sabbath is a holy day that has been blessed by God in the story of Creation. I am not a strictly observant person, nor do I keep all the laws and rituals prescribed by Judaism with respect to the Sabbath. However, I find the idea of the
Sabbath fascinating. In a beautiful and simple manner, Heschel explored the many reasons that make the Sabbath a holy day. It is a time for introspection and reflection, a time for stopping everyday work and exploring who we are, how we are feeling, and how we may participate in our community (Bers, 2008d).

This notion has some similarities with Erikson's moratorium. Researchers following in Turkle's pioneering steps found that adolescents experience this search for identity in different wireless hangouts and through many ways (Calvert, 2002; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001). According to a 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project report, 93% of teens ages 12 to 17 go online. Once there, they do different things. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of online teens visit social network sites. The older online teens, ages 14–17 (82%), use online social networks more than younger teens ages 12 and 13; 8% of online teens visit virtual worlds like Gaia, Second Life, or Habbo Hotel; 62% of online teens get news about current events and politics online; 48% bought books, clothing, or music online; 31% of online teens get health, dieting, or physical fitness information from the Internet; and 17% gather information online about topics that are hard to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health.

The report also notes that Internet connectivity is increasingly moving off the desktop into the mobile and wireless environment. Access to the Internet is changing. Although 93% of teens use a computer to go online, they also use cell phones, game consoles, and portable gaming devices to access the Internet. Some 75% of American teens ages 12–17 have a cell phone, and more than a quarter (27%) use them to go online. Similarly, 24% of teens with a game console (like a PlayStation 3, Xbox, or Wii) use it to go online (Lenhart et al., 2008). Internet access is becoming ubiquitous for young people. But wireless hangouts go beyond. The report shows that text messaging has become the primary way that teens reach their friends anywhere, anytime.

Despite technology being ubiquitous and the digital landscape easy to access, not all online environments are conducive to support purposeful explorations of identity. Not all wireless hangouts can become a palace in time. In my own work, I have explicitly designed several environments to support this developmental process, Zora being one of them (Bers, 2001). When I was designing them, the images associated with the Sabbath came to mind.

The seventh day served me as a powerful object to think with (Papert, 1980). It illuminated the kind of experience that I hoped young people would have while engaging with the technology. I imagined them entering into a palace in time where they would find tools for self-reflection and
community building. I hoped teens would collaborate with others in ongoing community projects and in the process explore their sense of self, purpose, and belonging. I provided them with tools that went beyond the traditional prayers, words, and conversations that I found at the synagogue. I wanted the results of quiet introspection and self-reflection to become tangible and manipulable. Thus in Zora children can create virtual temples with interactive objects and characters that express values and stories. And they can program virtual objects to react to user inputs. Zora, as an example of a palace in time, affords similar experiences to the ones I personally had when observing the Sabbath: self-reflection, creation, creativity, communication, and participation in a community.

While other virtual hangouts, such as Teen Second Life and social networking sites such as Facebook, might also support this developmental need, Zora was developed as a research platform with a theoretical and pedagogical framework, Positive Technological Development, that looks at the positive role that technology can play in young people's lives. The second part of the book will present the components of the PTD framework. PTD guides the design of digital landscapes that can serve similar developmental functions as playgrounds in early childhood, parks in the elementary school years, and a palace in time during adolescence.

First, the following vignettes present different examples of how the wireless hangout may become a palace in time to explore issues of identity and connect with others. The examples show how high school teenagers develop and make their mark in the online world through posting on YouTube to showcase their unique skills, building connections with people in games like World of Warcraft (virtually and physically), and making connections around the world by simply sharing their passion.

Vignette 1

15 MINUTES OF FAME

By Clement Chau

Ty Moss, 18 years old, North Carolina.

UrbanDictionary.com describes Ty Moss as "the awesome guy on YouTube who has cool tech videos and awesome daily vlogs" (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ty%20Moss). Ty is an 18-year-old YouTube personality who is known for his short video clips about iPhone and other Apple Inc. products and gadgets on the YouTube channel tyiphonehelp. Starting when he was 16, Ty has produced over 500 video clips distributed across five
different YouTube channels. Many of these video clips feature his comments and reviews about the newest gadget on the market, while others are about his life and hobbies. With over 120,000 subscribers and video clips reaching as many as 30 million view counts each, Ty Moss is viewed in the new media advertising industry as the epitome of viral marketing. Many new media technology companies send samples for Ty to review, and others aggressively seek a quick mention by him in a video. In return, Ty receives perks from various companies and financial compensation for embedding advertisements in his video clips. For Ty, YouTube is not only a source of social networking but also a source of income. For his audience, Ty is a perfect example of how young people are finding ways to craft a niche in the new media landscape to express their interests and ideas while making a significant impact on the market, the arts, and the economy.

YouTube provides a platform for anyone with a consumer-level digital video camera an opportunity to create video clips to share with the world. As a user-generated content platform, YouTube provides mechanisms for users to share content; the YouTube staff does not create any original video content and does little to monitor, manage, or advertise the content created by its users. After a simple registration process, anyone over the age of 13 can create an account and a channel page to distribute video clips and monitor audience reaction via a rating and feedback comment system. Audience members can add particular video clips to their Favorites play lists and subscribe to a favorite user's channel to receive updates when a new video clip is posted. In these ways, YouTube creates a community around sharing video clips.

Ty Moss is one of many teens who have found YouTube as a new media playground. Ty loves playing with the newest technology and electronic gadgets, and he is someone we might call a tinkerer and a little bit of a hacker. At the age of 16, Ty received an iPhone, a popular smart cellular phone produced by Apple. Promptly after receiving the iPhone, Ty learned of a way to unlock or hack the system of the phone so that he could use unauthorized features and applications on his new gadget. At that time, Ty was also engrossed with the YouTube culture, where amateurs post video clips of all kinds of topics. He made his debut video quickly after he learned of the hack feature and posted the video *The Easiest Way to Jailbreak ANY Firmware iPhone!* on his newly created channel on February 15, 2008. This video received 500 viewers within a single day; within two weeks it was indexed and searchable by the Google search engine; and by May 14, 2009, his debut video made it to the list of Featured Videos on the YouTube front page. To date, Ty's debut video has over 37,000 views, and it launched his career as a YouTube personality known for his videos on topics related to technology and new media.

Ty has learned over time that being a YouTube personality can be a career; but it is not an easy one. Ty has learned to manage business (creating an online store to sell merchandise related to his celebrity), build a relationship with his audience (via Twitter, Facebook, and live video chats), control advertising and
revenue streams (via the YouTube Partner program, whereby he profits from advertisements embedded in his videos), and liaise with the new technology and gadget industry partners so that he can be first to review their products on YouTube. When asked, Ty would quickly say that YouTube is his main occupation, and one in which he works hard to maintain his significance within the community and to ensure that he remains a top search result when anyone looks for tips and trends related to Apple products. To this end, he has created numerous Web sites, attended industry events, and kept up to date with the newest innovations and trends in the market. In other words, Ty works to maintain relevance and dominance over a niche that he created within the YouTube community to make certain that his 15 minutes of fame lasts longer than 15 minutes.

Today, Ty has branched out to review and “blog” about other gadgets and applications such as game console systems, software applications, and new media trends. He created other channels including tyistech and tyonthefly to accommodate video content not related to the iPhone or Apple. In addition, Ty connects with his audience through his personal channel; OTyMoss0, where he produces video blogs, or vlogs, about his day-to-day life. His fans and subscribers watch Ty report about his day—whether it is a video clip about his new girlfriend; a trip to the hair salon; his annoying sister; or Ty getting ill, then well, then ill again. Through these video clips, the audience learns about not only Ty’s perspectives on the newest gadgets but also who Ty is as a teenager. The audience provides Ty support and motivation to produce new video clips, and in return, Ty responds to technical questions raised by the audience. This dynamic relationship helps sustain Ty’s interests in the community and gives him inspiration and ideas to create more video clips that his audience would enjoy watching. Beyond contributing to the YouTube community and helping his audience, Ty also leverages his celebrity to promote charity work, such as his participation in Project for Awesome, in which he encouraged his audience to donate to the Lumos charity (then called the Children’s High Level Group). Nonetheless, aside from the range of personal video clips Ty has made over the years about his life, his passion and his niche remain Apple Inc. products.

Vignette 2

A WORLD OF ONE’S OWN

by Lauren Lanster

Jen, 16 years old, Mattapoisett, Mass.
Jen is a shy 16-year-old high school student from Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, who lives somewhat far from her friends and from her boyfriend of just under
a year. She is a high school junior and is having difficulties coping with how far her home is from her high school and friends, as she lives about an hour away by car and does not have her driver’s license. She recently moved into her house in Mattapoissett and does not know many people there.

Her father is the CEO of a company and constantly works until late at night and travels. Her mother lives with her younger brother, a golf prodigy, in Florida, where she can supervise his golf trips. Though her parents are not divorced or separated, the whole family is rarely together except for a weekend every six weeks or so. Jen’s boyfriend, whom she met at a summer program, lives in Miami, Florida, and she sees him once a month at best. Thus, Jen finds herself home alone a lot of the time.

To cut the loneliness and pass the time after school until her father comes home, Jen has started playing World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) launched in November 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment. With more than 12 million subscribers as of October 2010, WoW is currently the world’s most-subscribed MMORPG (http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?101007). As with other MMORPGs, players create and control a character avatar within a game world, explore the landscape, fight various monsters, complete quests or missions that can bring rewards, interact with nonplayer characters or other players, and form and join guilds. While a character can be played on its own, players can also group with others to tackle more challenging quests. As characters become more developed, they can gain various talents and skills and learn different professions.

Initially, Jen only devoted one or two hours a week to the game, but she soon found herself having more and more fun playing. She especially liked to go on “kills” with other players, in hopes of killing bosses. Players acquire possessions, called loot, during these “kills,” and the more possessions one owns, the better. Jen found herself accumulating more and more possessions and finding her skill level rising sharply.

Jen became such a good player that she quickly rose in the ranks and started being scouted out by other players to join their guilds. She stopped dreading the long hours home alone without her family and started embracing her virtual family. Like a real-life family, she and other players would look out for each other during “raids” and schedule times to meet online during the day. She introduced the game to some of her friends at school, so they could play together while being far apart from each other. By signing into her WoW account, the one-hour geographical distance between Jen and her friends became obsolete. She found herself becoming closer with her school friends, especially the males.

Jen began mediating a forum about WoW where people posted hints, asked for help, gave advice, and shared other facts about “killing bosses” and acquiring goods in WoW. People sought her advice. At 16, Jen was helping players all around the world, some of whom were over twice her age. Jen eventually took a
trip to California to BlizzCon, a large annual convention for games released by Blizzard. She wanted to meet her virtual family that so often substituted for her real family. The connection became even stronger, and Jen made long-lasting friendships with the people she spent several hours a day online with.

After about a year, Jen's school work began to suffer. Jen realized this and sold her account. However, she still maintains an administrative status on the forums and continues to give advice to those struggling to succeed in WoW. She keeps the virtual friendships she made but also has stronger connections with her school friends. WoW facilitated a way for Jen to hang out with her friends despite the difficulty of the geographical distance between her home and school. Without such a platform, Jen might not have learned the value of collaborating with others in the pursuit of the same goal and working in a team environment. Though her school work did start to suffer, she learned how to deal with the responsibility of filling a role in a group and communicating with others. For a shy 16 year old, this was an education unlike any other.

Vignette 3
A GLOBAL CONNECTION

By Alyssa Ettinger

Ricky, 17 years old, London.

Ricky has excelled at football (soccer) since his first five-a-side game at age three. His natural talent and strong kick earned him the nickname “Golden Foot” by his first coach. Having lived in London all his life, Ricky worked his way up to play on the Watford youth team, one of several club teams in the football-mad city looking to gather talented young players. As a junior in high school, Ricky is not quite good enough to play professionally, so he is now exploring universities that would allow him to continue playing at a slightly less rigorous caliber. He is interested in the London School of Economics, which could satiate his growing fascination with business and entrepreneurship, as well as allow him to join the football team.

A dedicated and inquisitive student, Ricky has developed a great appreciation for the strategy and philosophy behind the game to add to an impressive repertoire of technique and footwork. He enjoys watching international games year-round, intently studying the subtle skills and player formations modeled by the professionals. Years of watching games, researching players, and learning from his own football experiences have resulted in a vast, multidimensional network of insights into the sport. Last summer, Ricky was inspired to express and share this passion for football by creating a blog on a social networking site, Tumblr. The micro-blogging site offers an easy-to-use interface with
customizable colors, themes, and layouts. Users can create and publish text, photo, audio, and video content, which is viewed and often "reblogged" by other users, instantly passing on content while crediting the author.

Ricky spent weeks choosing the perfect background pictures, font colors, and layout for his blog and even created a logo with the tagline "Colorful insight on the world's greatest game." Eventually, he began posting his own football news stories, live blog updates on current games, editorials, and other witty perspectives on the sport, complete with YouTube video links to related interviews and game clips when appropriate. As fellow Tumblr users read, commented on, and reblogged Ricky's posts, Ricky rapidly garnered a relatively large global audience. About one year after his blog's creation, he was featured as "Tumblr's Favorite Sports Site" in the directory and has since received overwhelmingly positive feedback from his readers. Ricky takes great pride in looking up his site traffic statistics using Google Analytics, proof that his content is being read by people in over 100 countries.

As his site has grown, Ricky has been able to take advantage of his widespread audience to raise awareness for various international charities, categorized under his "Good Causes" tab. He provides a link to the charities' Web sites and a short editorial for each one, encouraging donations from readers. Ricky is currently exploring ways to make his site more interactive by negotiating deals with football merchandizing Web sites and creating contests for readers to enter with a "free giveaway" prize. He has even begun to receive advertising offers from football and other sports-based companies, opening the doors for a promising entrepreneurship opportunity before even entering university. Ricky now corresponds daily with other young football-loving readers from around the world who are fans of his blog. Most recently, some readers have contacted Ricky with the hopes of contributing to his site as student-writers. To Ricky's surprise, they are willing to write for free. Indeed, the blog's success provides for valuable publicity for such young writers, not to mention a powerful asset on their college résumés.
Summary

This summary provides an overview of the key ideas in the first part of the book. The introduction presented the need for the PTD framework, from both a personal perspective and an academic one. It also provided a description of this theoretical model and the two main intellectual traditions from which it was conceived, Constructionism and positive youth development. The first part of the book introduced the notion of technology as a developmental space. By using Erikson's psychosocial framework, which focuses on the struggles and milestones at different developmental stages, I used different metaphors to think about the role of technology as supporting the fundamental tasks for positive development at different age ranges. Table PI.1 summarizes these chapters.

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<td>Playgrounds support autonomous explorations, creativity, open-ended play, risk taking. Child can choose and is in control. Playpens are safe and support limited exploration and creativity. Adult chooses and is in control.</td>
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