

## Social Studies Special Issue: Civic Literacy in a Digital Age

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### Abstract

Young people today consume large amounts of information through various media outlets and simultaneously create and distribute their own messages via information and communication technologies and massively multiplayer online gaming. In doing so, these 'digital natives' are often exposed to violent, racist, or other deleterious messages. Additionally, these digital citizens must navigate issues of information security, privacy, and identity theft. Because efforts to control access to information and exposure to these risks are fraught with difficulties, the most effective way to safeguard students and young citizens is through education. Children and youth need instruction on the application of skills for critical analysis and ethical decision making as citizens in a digital world.

Marc Prensky (2001) has referred to the next generation of citizens as "digital natives." These are young people, born after 1984, for whom digital technology has become ubiquitous. Indeed, Prensky (2001b) estimates that high school students today have spent twice as many hours engaged in video game play as reading books. Thus, educating these digital natives presents unique challenges to social studies and citizenship education. Moreover, young people today consume large amounts of information through various media outlets and simultaneously create and distribute their own messages via information and communication technologies. In doing so, these digital natives are often exposed to violent, racist, or other deleterious messages. Additionally, these digital citizens must navigate issues of information security, privacy, and identity theft. Because efforts to control access to information and exposure to these risks are fraught with difficulties, the most effective way to safeguard students and young citizens is through education.

With the advent of the Web there is broad access to the world, but users often lack the cultural sensitivity that can foster collaboration in a global community. Young people are especially prone to misperceive the perspectives and opinions of others. Children and youth need instruction on the application of skills for critical analysis and ethical decision making as citizens in a digital world. Education for such “cybercitizenship” is a natural extension of the citizenship education role the social studies have always played in school curricula. Lessons in cybercitizenship, for example, might address the problematic aspects of the Internet and enhance critical skills for managing these challenges. These lessons might also mean, however, extending the same sorts of skills needed by effective citizens to the digital civic space.

Perhaps nowhere is the intersection of these issues more prevalent than in the quickly emerging synthetic worlds of massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). One approach that holds potential for educating these digital natives is through the use of MMORPGs. Interactions in these virtual, synthetic worlds can mirror those in the ‘real’ world and outside society in terms of rules, laws, economic interaction, and civic engagement, thus providing a potential teaching tool by which to develop engaged citizens.

The second James F. Ackerman Colloquium on Technology and Citizenship, held on the campus of Purdue University in July 2007, was designed to bring together a group of 30 scholars to present research and to collaborate on these and other technology related issues. The event was sponsored by the James F. Ackerman Center for Democratic Citizenship, housed in Purdue University’s College of Education (<http://www.education.purdue.edu>). The Colloquium was entitled “Educating for Citizenship in Digital and Synthetic Worlds: Privacy, Protection and Participation.” The goal was to engage participants in discussions related, but not limited to

1. The role of technology in the development of knowledge and skills required by citizens in an increasingly digital and global world, demonstrating connections between everyday individual actions and global well-being.
2. The tension between the constitutional right to freedom of speech and the protection of young people online.
3. Operationalizing privacy in a digital age.
4. The potential of social networking and MMORPGs for citizenship education.

The Colloquium provided a unique opportunity to interact with a relatively small circle of scholars and researchers working in this area in order to discuss common interests and take stock of the current state of this field of study. In addition to the paper sessions, participants toured Purdue’s Envision Center for Data Visualization and had keynote addresses from [Edward Castronova](#), an economist from Indiana University who has studied the economies of massively multiplayer online games, and Scott Ksander, Purdue University’s Chief Information Security Officer.

Participants included Eui-kyung Shin (Northern Illinois University), Don Falls (Southeast High School), James M. Shiveley (Miami University), Joseph R. Feinberg (Georgia State University), Mark van 't Hooft (Kent State), Shreya Desai (Walker Middle School), Krista Glazewski (New Mexico State), Dan Zalles (SRI International), Joe Obrien (University of Kansas), John Lee (North Carolina State), Nick deKanter (Muzzy Lane Software), Dan Stuckart (Wagner College), Peg Ertmer (Purdue University), Gayle Y. Thieman (Portland State University, NCSS President), Brendan Calandra (Georgia State University), Tom Hammond (Lehigh University), Sarah Grafman (Muzzy Lane Software), Bill Watson (Purdue University), Angie Schoenbeck (Purdue University), David McDivitt (Oak Hill High School), Christopher McGrew (Indiana Department of Education), Christina Kapp

(Harcourt School Publishers), Scott Ksander (CERIAS, Purdue University), Edward Castronova (Indiana University), Bob Evans (Purdue University), and Christian Mattix (Purdue University).

The colloquium was hosted by members of the National Council for the Social Studies College and University Faculty Assembly, Phillip J. VanFossen, James F. Ackerman Professor of Social Studies Education and Director of the Ackerman Center at Purdue University, and Michael J. Berson, Professor of Social Science Education at the University of South Florida.

Following the Colloquium, each participant was encouraged to respond to a call for manuscripts for this special issue.

In this issue, we feature the following article highlighting the theme of Civic Literacy in a Digital Age:

**[Are We Preparing Young People for 21st Century Citizenship With 20th Century Thinking? Building a Case for a Virtual Laboratory of Democracy](#)**

Joseph O'Brien

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