Socializing Young People to Ethics via Play Experience:

Browser Games and Parental Concerns for Safety Online

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Abstract:

This paper considers an online game and its relation to safety and privacy, in order to examine social and ethical issues raised by parental concern over harmful content. To gain real insights on the responsibility of adults, it develops a hands-on approach that takes into account the major stakeholders, especially young people and the related circle of people around them. Therefore the research question that is raised is: how do browser games provide reassurance to parents about their children's safety and privacy? The issue of safety online is explored in three parts, using an ethnographic research framework: it explores a specific online game, it provides a profile of participants, it analyses their types of actions in relation to safety and privacy, and discusses the results in terms of incidence of risk, peer-monitoring and community control. The findings show that there is a rather strong tendency to self-regulation, but that tendency is partly due to a strong presence of mediating adults and peers. The results are discussed in terms of incidence of risk, peer-monitoring and networked means of control on the one hand, and in terms of scientific contribution to socialization theory on the other hand. They lead to final considerations on the repertoire of ethical strategies set up online and its meaning for the concerns of adults towards online risk as well as the need for policies on regulation and self-regulation. They also lead to extensions on the socialization to norms and the appropriation of ethics by young people.

Keywords: Ethics; Young People; Experience; Cognition; Self-Regulation; Online Games; Harmful Content; Protection; Human Rights; Virtual Ethnography

Résumé:

Cette recherche considère un jeu en ligne et sa relation aux questions de sécurité et de vie privée afin de mieux comprendre les enjeux sociaux et éthiques soulevés par l'inquiétude des parents quant aux contenus nuisibles. Elle développe une approche de terrain qui observe les principales parties prenantes, particulièrement les jeunes et leurs cercles de relations. La question de recherche posée est: comment les jeux en ligne fournissent-ils une réassurance aux parents quant à la sécurité de leurs enfants? La recherche explore ces points en trois temps, utilisant une méthodologie empruntée à l'ethnographie virtuelle: elle observe un jeu en ligne spécifique, elle fournit un profil des participants actifs dans l'intervention éthique, elle analyse leurs types d'actions par rapport au maintien de la sécurité et de la vie privée. Les résultats démontrent qu'il y a une tendance forte à l'autorégulation dans les jeux en ligne, mais elle est nuancée par une forte présence de médiateurs, notamment des adultes. Les résultats sont discutés en termes d'incidence de risque, de surveillance par les pairs et de contrôle en réseau d'une part, et en termes de contribution scientifique à la théorie de la socialisation d'autre part. Ils donnent lieu à des considérations finales sur le répertoire de stratégies éthiques mis en place et sa signification pour les positions des adultes vis-à-vis le risque en ligne et du besoin de politiques de régulation et d'autorégulation. Ils mènent également à des extensions sur la socialisation et l'appropriation des normes par les jeunes.

Mots-clés: Éthique; Jeunes; Expérience Vécue; Connaissance; Autorégulation; Jeux en Ligne; Contenu à Risque; Protection; Droits de l'Homme; Ethnographie Virtuelle

Introduction

Video games have been the object of a lot of public and media attention focussed mainly on harmful content like violence (*World of Warcraft*), or pornography (*Grand Theft Auto IV*). This criticism of games raises social and ethical issues, in connection to their impact on safety, privacy and dignity. The responsibility of adults, especially parents, but also game designers and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) has been called into public question, leading to government policies like the [Safer Internet Programme](#) of the European Union. But is the public's concern about privacy and safety online correctly placed and understood?

Media researchers are divided on the issue. Some think that harmful content can lead young people to harmful behaviour, which has caused a lot of public mistrust in these games (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Others consider that young people are able to protect themselves via online uses and gratifications, and develop ways of "coping" with harmful content (Livingstone & Lievrouw, 2006). These theories show tension and disagreement among observers. They tend to be called upon when dramatic events occur, reported by the media, like

the 1999 Columbine killing, in which it was discovered that the two young killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were fans of violent video games such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*.

Far away from "media hype", this analysis attempts to provide insights on users' safety practices in everyday life, focusing on less sensational and violent games. It explores the issue of safety online in three parts, using a qualitative analysis provided by an ethnographic research framework: it observes a specific online game, it provides a profile of participants, it analyses their types of actions in relation to safety and privacy. It then discusses the findings in terms of incidence of risk and experience of ethics, with a special focus on peer-monitoring and network control. This leads to final considerations about risk of harm in relation to ethical practices online and to some reflections on the way young people can be socialized to ethics via game experience.[1]

Research Framework

Theoretical Context

There are two main theories about online gaming in the academic field of media and communication studies, both stemming from prior research in mass media, i.e. "effects theory" and "uses and gratification theory". The effects theory posits that online games present an incidence of risk, involving mostly aggressive behaviour, addiction, isolation, group polarization and cyber stalking (Gerbner, 1980; Spears, Lea & Lee, 1990; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). The uses and gratifications theory argues that risk is offset by pleasure in participation, social shaping, and peer relations (Turkle, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Livingstone & Lievrouw, 2006; Allard & Blondeau, 2007). The first one has led to public policies on protection of young people, in the name of human rights and the dignity of the person, whereas the second one has promoted self-regulation by the industry and by the users themselves, in the name of individual "empowerment".

A third theory is emerging, focussed on the "socialization" of young people by the media, that tries to go beyond the oppositions between effects and gratifications, protection and participation, dependence and empowerment. Socialization theory considers not only the uses but also the values, norms and attitudes that are acquired by young people in their interaction with media. It takes into account not just the media structure (effects theory) or the young people's pleasure (uses and gratifications theory), but the situated interaction between the two and the competences that are called upon for dealing with potential risk and applying the adequate ethical response to it, using some of the tenets of social cognition (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan, 2007).

Socialization theory considers the felt experience of risk from the perspective of the young person in relation with the situation she/he is in and with her/his interactions with peers and adults, especially as offline and online exchanges are becoming the rule, with real life consequences. It also seeks to understand the appropriation of ethics by young people and tries to overcome the traditional opposition between morals and ethics. Traditionally, they tend to be opposed and contrasted: morals tend to consider values as top down, universal, implicit and abstract norms and principles—that require duties and responsibilities, and call on law and sanction in their application—whereas ethics tend to perceive values as bottom up, pragmatic, concrete, explicit, participative and affective actions—that promote a sense of autonomy and call on social pressure and monitoring in their application. Using a more systemic and generative

approach to the acquisition of the sense of values via a process of social learning, socialization theory inquires into the possibility of achieving morals at the end of the process, not as a set of obligations at the beginning of the process. Due to the nature of new digital media and communication services, in social networks the balance is currently in favour of the operational and ethical approach, as can be noted by the proliferation of codes of practice, guidelines, charters, etc. This trend is in fact a correction, from the first media systems that tended to support the top-down normative and rational approach, as they were less participatory and interactive. Yet, as more and more people join cyberspace activities, and as more and more cyberspace activities have real-life effects (intended and un-intended), reducing ethics to the resolution of dilemmas between personal interests in competition with each other does not provide a general sense of shared moral direction, only a sense of direct action. (Frau-Meigs, 2010a).

Some research confirms the importance of peer-to-peer monitoring for "coping" with risk online, peers by-passing the authority of adults and family values (Livingstone & Lievrouw, 2006; Allard & Blondeau, 2007). Such research tends to extol the importance of peer exchanges in the process, and minimizes risk in relation to other social benefits. Experiencing risk as well as experiencing ethics seems possible on social networks, as long as the user experience is different from the consumer experience, and the goals for interaction override the goals for consumption. But user experience has also become a kind of buzzword that rhymes with empowerment, when little verification of this has been done, especially in terms of consequences to socialization and appropriation of ethics and norms for behaviour. Expectations have to be taken into account, unexpected uses, and at the same time a certain explicit amount of consciousness and awareness of the consequences of use (Frau-Meigs, 2010b).

Part of the problem resides in the difficulty of having young people evaluate explicitly their experiences and their awareness of use. The felt or emotional quality of interaction is often lost in research done by adults. One of the solutions is trying to do research with youngsters as voluntary participants or informants. A certain amount of reflexivity over the felt experience has to be captured to understand how socialization proceeds with young people. It implies the need for a situated action approach that doesn't exclude the larger cultural context. The larger cultural context of the Internet is rather politically and ethically loaded, as it often deals with people's values and attitudes. This can be verified with online games, whose history of violence is closely related to commercial exploitation of special effects for movies, and thus appealed to heavy consumers of gimmicks and accessories (Allard & Blondeau, 2007). This trend still exists, but now a full array of games offering other strategies than violence is accessible. There are quest games, mission games, fantasy animal games, that attract a large number of players. Consequently online games have diversified into a variety of categories, the two main ones being Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) and browser games.

The games that attract most media attention for potentially harmful content are MMORPG's that lend themselves to "hardcore gaming"—intense, competitive and long interactions among players—and may lead to incidences of risk (violence, cyberstalking, etc). It is less so with browser games, related to the concept of "casual gaming"—relaxed and informal play, not necessarily leading to intense interactions (Aarseth, 2003). They have also attracted much less research interest as revealed by the few secondary sources found on the subject. Browser games that emphasize cooperation may be places where privacy and safety are fostered. The nature of the games may be conducive to trust and the building of friendships whereas MMORPGs, with their emphasis on competition, may have the opposite social effects, even without the violent content that attracts so much attention.

Research Question

To gain valid insights and avoid the trap of the media hype, it is necessary to develop an empirical and inductive approach that takes into account the major stakeholders, especially young people and the related circle of peers and adults around them. A more focused research question then would be: how do browser games provide ethical cues to players via their felt experience, therefore increasing reassurance to parents about their children's safety and privacy?

This narrower question implies to consider the various options offered to the players, as the context of online gaming has evolved through time and across stakeholders. The game providers have introduced policies and standards, including rules governing interactions between people as with the [Pan European Game Information](#) (PEGI). They make it possible to assess a transgression to safety when there is one and to take care of it. The administrators themselves have moved into self-regulation and provided a number of solutions for players' safety that need to be checked in their efficiency.

Even before entering the field of observation, a number of assumptions are therefore present that can inform the research task. There is the need to take into account the player's choice of a browser game: choosing a controlled, long-standing tight-knit community or platform for "casual gaming" can improve safety and privacy conditions, in contrast with "hardcore gaming". There is also the need to consider what happens if the administrators fail to provide safety: will some players take ethical initiatives for the sake of the community? If so, who are they and what motivates them?

This set of external conditions needs to be kept in mind when starting the observation as they can also shed light on how online gaming creates trust via safe ethical practices, thus providing opportunities to establish friendship and interactions online and maybe offline. It can also shed light on the notion of play as felt experience and its implications for the acquisition of ethical practices, as, beyond the notion of fun, there is also the cognitive notion of engagement, of being full participants in the activity undertaken and having rewards that are not necessarily attached to winning but to literally "playing a part" in a network dynamics.

Methodology

Choosing the Online Game

Devising a method about felt experience by young people implies to call upon engagement and agency as cognitive capacities and competences that count for sense-making. The research design places the "young player as informant" in a situation of voluntary participation, so as to capture a certain amount of reflexivity over the felt experience. Choosing a well-established community of players is also essential, as a situated context for evaluating the interactions among young people. This is why the [Feerik](#) platform was chosen, as it has several years of existence, and maintains itself in relative stability and consistency of content.

Feerik is a French company specialized in the creation of on-line games. Created in 2005, it had instant success with its first game "Elevez un Dragon", rapidly followed by new games on various themes. The Feerik strategy aimed at attracting a lot of different people, who are invited to "check out" the other games on the platform, creating a Feerik community. The concepts of their games is based on "casual gaming", to create an entertaining environment accessible to all kinds of players, whether they are occasional, regular, or passionate players. Some of the most

successful Feerik games are "My Diva Doll", a fashion based game aimed mainly at girls, "Age of Magic", where the player incarnates a witch or wizard, and "Pony Valley", where the player adopts a pony.

Because it is a game that has attracted people for a relatively long time, it is possible to measure the impact of "Elevez un dragon" (henceforth EuD) over the long term. Also, as the first Feerik game, it has framed the way the producers have imagined the other games since. EuD is based on raising and grooming virtual animals, where the player becomes a dragon trainer. It is mostly targeted for young people, and consists in a magical universe made of cute dragons, witches, elves and gnomes. Yet it has attracted quite a few older players, who are often more regular than the children themselves, whether they are parents, grandparents, or simply people looking to have a fun time. In the words of the designers: "It has been now almost 4 years that we started this adventure, and we are proud to be followed today by a vast community of several thousands of active players, from 7 to 77 years old" (http://blog.feerik.com).

In EuD, the player takes care of her/his dragon, making sure that its cave is clean, and giving it all the care it needs, from brushing its scales, to feeding it and letting it hunt. As it grows, the trainer teaches it to fly, fight and breathe fire. Players must also choose a job, to gain more "griffe" (i.e. "claws", the virtual money on the game), as players exchange services among themselves. Different options are offered: players can choose to become a flying, fighting, or fire-breathing trainer; else they can be a manicurist (to increase the dragon's scales), a healer (to increases its health), or a sage (to increase its morale and well-being).

The social networking capacity of EuD is increased by a chat and a forum attached to the game, to allow players to talk with each other, or do their own publicity to get more clients and gain more "claws". They can also ask for help in these. The forum and chat are moderated by players themselves, often people who volunteered to act as moderators at the very early stages of the game.

The player as informant had an intimate knowledge of EuD and other Feerik games, which made it possible to see the kinds of exchanges that could escape someone who only uses distant observation. This intimacy was propitious to the observation of all the stakeholders in their respective roles, while favouring a certain amount of reflexivity because of this long term, prior practice. Practice, intimacy and reflexivity were called upon not to be taken in by the surface appearance of some actions. For example, while on the surface it looked as if the players had total control over their privacy, observation of interactions showed that various moderators ensured good privacy procedures and conditions.

Applying Virtual Ethnography to Felt Experience

To take into account the participatory dimension of the game situation, the research design resorted to the tools of ethnography, so as to study the codes and belief systems of the players. As a qualitative method, the focus of ethnography is on the setting, the participants and the behaviour of people in a group. It records actions, what certain individuals in the group did and how others responded. It aims at providing concepts to interpret the findings and observations (Berger, 2000).

In dealing with social networks on the Internet, there is the additional hurdle of taking into account "the virtual". Recently, ethnographers like Christine Hine (2000) have proposed a set of innovative principles that allow the transposition from real life tribes to online communities. They have provided criteria for "virtual ethnography": the website can be the

equivalent of the tribe; "a sustained presence" is necessary, which implies intensive engagement with the everyday life of the players as "a valuable source of insight". "Concentrating on flow and connectivity" is also important to consider interactions and implications of strategies among stakeholders (Hine, 2000).

In planning the research, the "young player as informant" applied the method of virtual "participant observation". She used her own playing experience in a specific browser game to focus on its forum, where most interactions took place. She complemented it with additional data, to confront others' views with hers. This required a regular time-line, with a period of observation that lasted a whole year, from November 2007 to November 2008. She kept a log, recording the changes in the game, who the main players were, how they interacted with others. She also looked at the scripted interactions and codes that were exchanged on the sites, and archived by the webmasters, either on the forum, the Feerik blog or website. Finally, she interviewed some key respondents, on the issues of protection, ethics and interaction.

But virtual ethnography also has some limits, particularly the informant's own observer bias as Hine (2000) said, "ethnography is necessarily partial". She was familiar with computer games, she found pleasure in browser platforms, and was reluctant to show them in a negative light. Also, there is the risk of "mind reading" which is to assume the informant's interpretation of a player's behaviour is what that person really meant, when his or her reactions are his or hers alone (Berger, 2000: 167). This was compensated by interviewing some of the key players: the observer sent a short questionnaire to them and analysed their answers. It was also mitigated by the use of her bilingualism (French/English) in order to establish more distance between her and the other players: though she interacted with them in French, she wrote her log and recorded her thoughts in English.

Research Findings

Profile of Participants in Relation to Safety and Privacy

A "sustained presence" for over a year, cumulated with intensive engagement for three years, made it possible to observe some steady patterns. It clearly appears that a certain number of players take care of safety issues. They also facilitate interaction between players and they originate actions with the players who respond to them. They are listed below in terms of implication with safety and privacy issues but there is no explicit hierarchy because the first relation remains a relation among players as peers, on an egalitarian basis.[2] Their roles have been labelled in terms of actions related to safety and incidence of risk, as one of the outcomes of the ethnographic methodology is suggesting profiles and typologies of people and actions.[3]

"Self-Designated Monitor" (SDM)

SDM (2007) is among the oldest of the players, into her sixties. She sees her activity as "playful" mostly, she doesn't claim any authority, she lets it be known that she is a grandmother and actually uses an unattractive pseudo to throw off potential stalkers: "The zero risk doesn't exist of course, but I do not think I am a 'prey' (especially considering my pseudo)". She is not aware of major problems but would "directly inform the Management". She has had experience about safety issues, and discussed with other parents about their responsibility especially with minors.

She also elaborated a message to warn players about the risks of the Internet, that she called "Danger of the Net":

> According to the sources of the Home Office, the Justice Department and the Department of Education (via the CSA) for the protection of minors I quote:
>
> Be suspicious towards those who want to know too much about you, never give:
>
> Your NAME, FIRST NAME, AGE, ADDRESS,
> Your MSN, BLOG and E-MAIL addresses
> Your TELEPHONE number (portable or home)
> The address of your SCHOOL or even your GRADE
>
> If you receive or if you see something that makes you feel ill-at-ease:
> Warn your parents or a person you trust.

SDM protects herself the same way as all the other informants, by using pseudos. She has given her personal data on EuD exclusively, and she considers other players as "virtual relations," not friends. She would prefer children not to make friends online as "It is a rather negative thing… for real life awaits them".

"Clan Leader" (CL)

CL is a teenager, in her mid-teens. She sees her activity as having "to make sure everything goes well at least with the players of the clan, and that they respect the rules, and receive the help they want, but I rarely need to intervene." The most severe action she heard of is "one week of expulsion from the forum for repeated flooding" performed by one of the nine forum moderators. The safety solutions she lists are: "the FAQ, the 'contact' button, private message to the player concerned, or to a forum moderator". She gives other players the steps to follow for the safety routines, which implies either contacting a peer or going to a designated spot and eventually resorting to the administrators. She protects herself the same way as all the other informants, by using pseudos and changing her avatar from time to time, so as to avoid traceability. She is aware of the risk of providing personal data online as "you never know who you are talking too". She has nonetheless given her personal data to "people I had known for over two years on EuD".

"Forum Moderator" (FM)

FM is a player in her early twenties. Her role is not only the policing of players for she must also "answer to players needs, and animate the forum" as well as "make sure that images or links of a pornographic nature do not spread on the forum". In such cases the culprit is banned immediately without forewarning. This means that moderators must read everything that is said on the forum. Even if they do not interfere in the conversation, they will know what was discussed, and if "we find someone revealing too much of their private life, we edit the message, and send a private message to the players to explain the situation". As someone who must protect other players, FM was most aware of online risks: "stolen identities, being tricked by someone you had faith in, stalking", these are "aimed especially at children, or people who for private reasons may be

psychologically weak". FM also said unwanted events, like links to pornographic sites, are extremely rare on EuD, and that in four years of moderating, "strange or suspicious people were rarely seen". FM too has revealed her identity to people she considered like friends, but she has only done so on EuD.

To these three visible profiles of "ethically-minded" participants, there needs to be added an additional stakeholder, who is not a player and is much less visible: the Feerik administrators team itself, as "last-resort authorities". They are the rulers of the game, they help when there is a technical problem, appoint moderators, and can expulse a player from the game itself, which a moderator cannot do. The Feerik administrators team took the initiative in August 2007 of warning players via their "news" page (on which all Feerik games opens every time a player logs in) of the "dangers of the net". They referred to two official public safety campaign videos, launched by the Swiss NGO Action Innocence that is dedicated to the protection of minors on the Internet (see *Figure 1:* "Action Innocence" Video and *Figure 2:* "Predators of the Net" Video). A link to the "news" page was added to the message from the "Self-Designated Monitor" (SDM), who wrote the warning to players on the forum. SDM and the Administrators thus built on each other's participation and co-constructed the ethical warning signals, using the larger social and cultural context of the Internet to buttress their prevention practices.

Although risks are present, the surveillance on the EuD forum coming from moderators as well as players makes it a fairly safe place for all people. The observation revealed how well newcomers were supervised from their very first time on the forum on. Players are quick to warn newcomers if they break a rule; often they are faster than the moderators themselves, who intervene later. This shows a community of experience and interpretation was built on that forum, where people look out for others. The fact that the people interviewed had revealed their identities to other EuD players and never elsewhere confirms that with safety comes trust, and friendships, even virtual ones. This may be due to the fact that this is a forum where posts are more carefully thought through. Chats and instant messaging are much more difficult to moderate, as pointed out by FM. As a result they are more likely places for aggressions of different kinds.
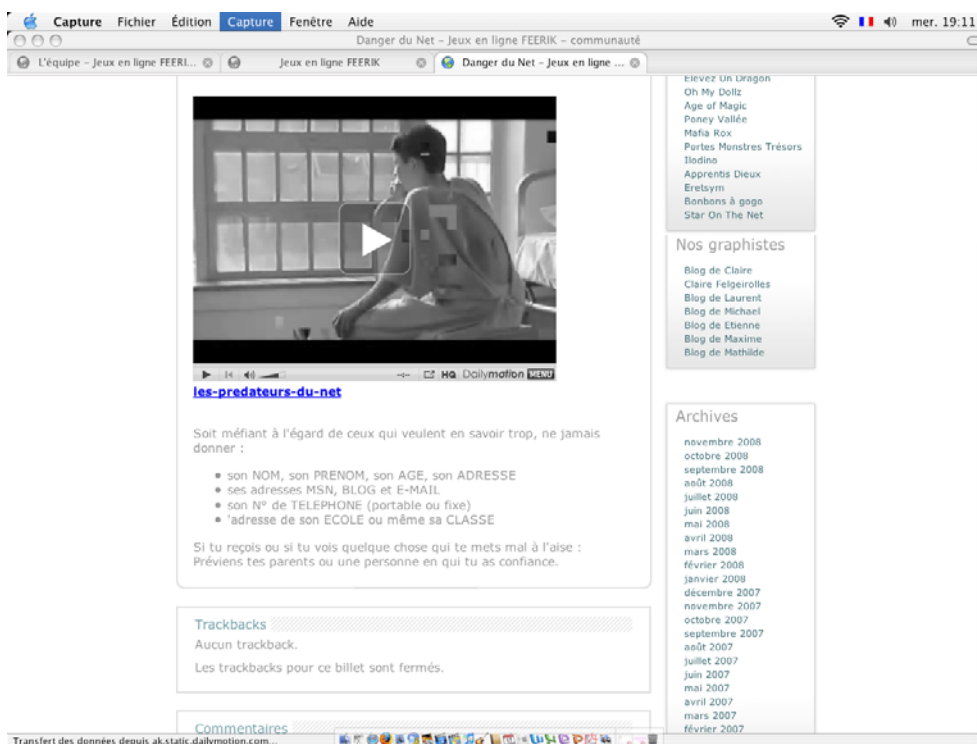
Figure 1: **"Action Innocence" Video**
Source: http://blog.feerik.com/index.php/2007/01/19/80-danger-du-net. Downloaded May 23, 2008.
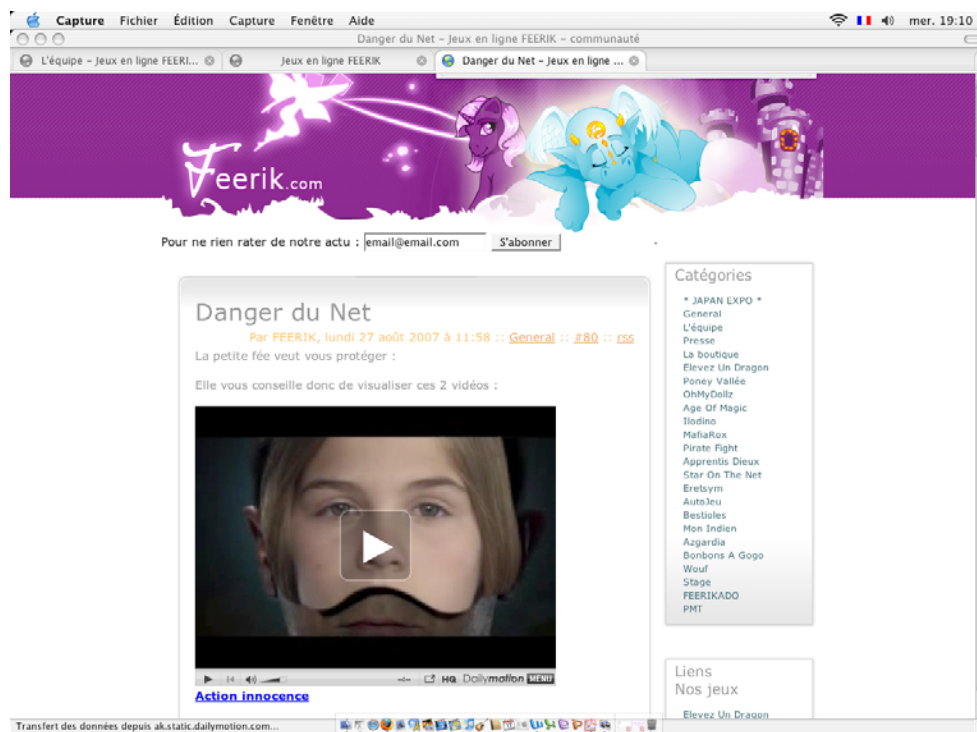
Figure 2: **"Predators of the Net" Video**
Source: http://blog.feerik.com/index.php/2007/01/19/80-danger-du-net. Downloaded May 23, 2008.

Types of Actions and Behaviours in Relation to Safety and Privacy

During the observation period, the "young player as informant" logged a certain number of actions related to privacy and safety initiatives taken not only by the administrators and moderators, but also by the players themselves.

The game's "code of conduct" is posted in more than one place: on the forum, on a link on the game itself, and when players first log onto the game, they are presented with those rules.

<div align="center">

"Code of Conduct" [Selected Extracts]

</div>

General
Any comment or unrefined and offensive behaviour addressed to anyone will be the object of a suspension of account for his/her author. In case of repetition, the account will definitively be suppressed.

Flooding is forbidden on the site, be it to advertise or to spread an idea or to obtain an answer more quickly. Any offender will be banished.

Forum
The sms style is forbidden here. As well as flooding (posting several messages in rapid succession)

All posts must be clear and understandable by all. If it is not the case, they will be deleted and his/her author, according to his/her response, can have his/her account closed.

Users
Every user makes a commitment to respect the code of conduct of the site as well as the netiquette and the basic rules of "savoir vivre". Every user who will not respect the rules expressed here will see his/her account deleted. Every user has to respect the other users by not interfering either with their party or with the dignity of the person. Any abuse must be indicated at once to the person in charge of the site who will take the necessary measures according to the gravity of the act.

Offensive behaviour
Any behaviour creating a bad atmosphere on the game, the chat or the forum (or any other virtual place closely or remotely connected to ELEVEZUNDRAGON) will be severely punished (from a simple warning to the suppression of the account).[4]

The rules deal with "netiquette and basic rules of 'savoir vivre'" as well as harmful behaviour; they warn the player about trespassing, and possible sanctions "from a warning to the suppression of the account". These are re-enforced by moderators on the forum, and they are rather harsh and authoritative.

Warnings about risks of the net (like "Danger of the Net") by the self-designated monitors like SDM. It reveals yet again the attention that players have for younger players, and the self-moderating capacities of the players.

Peer arbitration at clan level: there was one example of clan expulsion, by clan leaders, or clan moderators, after a player behaved in insulting ways. This was observed in the informant's own clan, as players who did not accept the tacit rules of the community were either expulsed, or simply never introduced in the clan. Eventually those who act this way stop going onto the forum, and sometimes leave the game itself.

Preventive strategies like using "épinglé" ("pinned" or "flagged" posts) also function for safety. These posts are "attached" to the top of the forum page, so that they are never retrograded to a second page, and are always the first to appear on the screen, providing a constant reminder to the players. The post for "Danger of the Net" was one of those, in the section of the forum entitled "the tavern", which is an informal meeting place, where players joke and invent parlour games instead of drinking. This strategy is supervised by the forum moderators, like FM, who decide when to flag a specific post.

This repertoire of warning and monitoring strategies shows that the game setting as well as the forum and chats related to it provide multiple opportunities for being aware of ethics and good practices. Once these practices are set, it becomes easier for players to feel safe, and have fun, without the need to be on guard all the time. Such a repertoire reveals that the young players have acquired competences through time, practice, and explicit use of the public campaigns for awareness. After a certain amount of time in the game, ethical practices can then become implicit, as the norms have been internalized, naturalized. As a result, it makes it possible to welcome newcomers, who are initiated faster and faster, by several people of different age ranges.

Discussion

In Relation to Ethical Practices

It seems parents should not be much concerned about issues of privacy and safety when their children play casually with browser games. Such games provide reassurance by offering several types of moderation and several strategies for enforcement of rules. The administrators have introduced policies and standards for interaction between players. A year-long observation confirmed that graduated responses do take place and are efficient. No harmful event took root long enough for most players to notice. Such responses illustrate the strong tendency for self-regulation on browser games and the felt experience of ethics, through practice and interaction with "ethically-minded" others.

Incidence of risk actually takes place on EuD especially and on Feerik at large, but it is "nipped in the bud" by constant moderating. Most players are aware of risks such as addiction or stalking, partly because they have been sensitised to them repeatedly. Over time, two trends were noticeable. The first one concerned the older generation of players, like SDM, who were actually scared and worried because they saw the media hype and the real life consequences of harmful behaviour on the Internet. The second trend concerned the younger generation of players, born with the web, who were drilled to be wary of its dangers. They have integrated this knowledge via their network practices, to the point that protective behaviour becomes more and more implicit. Self-regulation is in fact reinforced by self-protection, partly due to public awareness campaigns in the media (which proves that hype has a positive effect!).

This is coherent with previous virtual ethnography that distinguishes between "digital migrants" and "digital natives" (Prensky, 2006). It confirms the assumption that if the designers

or administrators failed in providing safety, some players or moderators would undertake ethical initiatives for the sake of the community. In a way, for Feerik, the "migrants" take care of the "natives", as far as ethics are concerned.

So, the choice of the browser game is important: choosing a controlled, long-standing tight-knit community on a platform like Feerik can improve safety and the privacy conditions in which a player operates. The explanation is partly in the browser games' logic, as they are locally stable. The Feerik platform provides a generally safe environment as well as a family-like atmosphere (players know each other from different games). The feeling of safety is partly induced by the identity construction already present within the whole platform, over a long period of time. Moving from one game to another means carrying that identity and its stability from EuD to all the other games, creating a community of practice and of interpretation that most players share.

As a result, the social links and connections between players are established before the players think about asking for personal data. Social issues like age or gender are first largely unquestioned by the players and then overlooked. There seems to be high levels of freedom of expressions, as well as privacy (use of private messages). The observations do not confirm the common belief according to which teenagers use browser games to get away from adults, and play with people their age (Allard & Blondeau, 2007). Indeed the pattern is different, at least on Feerik. Younger people make friends with adults, and conversely, and sometimes several family members join in the game together. While this may increase the risk of cyber-stalking, it can also build trust in an efficient way.

The observation reveals that the much-touted peer-to-peer monitoring is in fact a combination of peer-moderating and peer-protecting, which implies a high level of awareness of both risks and norms. This combination is very important for building trust and then engaging in friendly interactions. It confirms the bottom-up approach to ethics as initiated and enforced by participants who are on an equal footing because they are players first of all, whatever their age and their position of authority (game developers or site operators). The real underlying meaning of the noun "peer" is thus clarified: it doesn't mean people of the same age necessarily, as often assumed, it means people who partake of a situation or of a game willingly, the situation thus establishing the "peerness"—a situation that also suggests that people look closely at each other, constantly (the meaning of the verb "to peer").

Solving the ethical issues as they arise seems to helps answer the social issues. EuD takes social interaction one step further by allowing and encouraging players to meet in "real life" and to interact beyond the game (via a section called "agenda and meetings"). Most of the persons interviewed actually did volunteer information about themselves to others, including personal data, and corroborated that they made friends but limiting such contacts to EuD players. This validated the initial notion that if trust is created via safety, then friendship and interaction are likely to be established online *and* offline.

In Relation to Socialization and Felt Experience of Ethics

The implications of the case study for socialization theory are multidimensional, in relation to protection, participation and transmission. It appears that ethics can be a means to experience human rights principles, as an explicit series of conducts and behaviours; the non-ethical behaviours are not so much transgressions (wilful breaking of the norms) or disengagement from these norms because they do not seem to apply in virtual reality, but rather a result of absence of

transmission of these norms. When they are transmitted, they tend to be accepted. The long-term presence of a stable community confirms the importance of a group memory for the ease of recall of the safety messages that are circulating online and offline. It also suggests that ethics act as a kind of heuristics, short-term shortcuts that have been acquired through quick and repeated drills, in various actions, as witnessed in EuD. Transmission then is a cumulative process where the interaction with the technological tool is taken together with peer and adult mediations, in such a way that it is the norms and not so much the risks that are assimilated by young people.

Some of the elements of the socialization theory for making sense of one's self via the game experience as well as for appropriating ethics via practice gain some salience. Socialization appears as a cognitive process of internalization where several pieces of information are recycled, remixed and re-used in the context of the platform, to be put together into a dynamic repertoire or strategies for ethical conduct. Socialization sensitizes young people to norms more than to risks, and prepares them not to accept just any norms, unquestioned. The process can be seen as having multiple steps, as a series of specific cognitive assessments and competences that may reinforce positive attitudes to ethics and values:

1. *Engagement* is part of the motivation to join social networks, as they solicit attention and participation. Choosing a platform that is friendly, and consistently dedicated to casual gaming alleviates the feeling of fear or threat and gives the feeling of being at home, while maintaining a low level of vigilance.
2. *Anticipation* is also part of the felt experience as young people build expectations and can transfer some of the skills acquired in one game to other games, as facilitated by platforms and online communities. The initial sense of what one is doing increases the feeling of agency and self control over the situation.
3. *Interpretation* is part of the process of appraisal, as young people evaluate the situation, the agents, the interactions and their consequences. Part of the pleasure of the game is due to the knowledge of what to expect and the quasi certainty of being able to deal with it or to find the right people to help. It is also important as it builds skills for evaluating the reliability of sources and of helpers, which consolidates trust.
4. *Reflexivity* is connected to practices accumulated through time. Recounting of the observations to others increases self-awareness about the process of self-protection, to the point that moderators and mentors keep reinforcing their abilities as they help others. It can add to the pleasure of the casual game experience.
5. *Performance* is encouraged by the game structure that brings young people to assume other identities, via avatars and pseudos. They can have thus a better understanding of social roles and expectations about attitudes and values.
6. *Co-construction* is an added value as the players, the game moderators and administrators buttress each others' knowledge and bring in their cultural context; they do not just rely on individual empowerment but also use some elements of social accountability and collective responsibility. This alleviates the stress of ethics put on the sole responsibility of the individual, be it of children or adults.
7. *Revision* is part of socialization as one becomes aware that values and ethical positions need to be reviewed and sometimes revisited. The whole notion of protection is being revisited online: it is being affected by the debate on parental control and filtering and endorsed by the different actors at stake, in an empowerment framework (young as user) rather than in a security framework (young as consumer).

Conclusion

Answering the research question allowed for specific conclusions that "reduce the puzzlement" (Geertz, 1993) but need to be tested beyond the Feerik platform. The findings tend to enrich the modalities of socialization theory: they show that young people are able to protect themselves via online practices *and* they also stress the importance of the mediation of adults, less absent from such environments as it is generally estimated. Young people are actively seeking and imparting information about protection, not just as a "coping" practice but as a cognitive sense-making mechanism. Parents are present as well, either as players with their children or as virtual parental figures. Parental mediation, also visible through social pressure and the work of NGOs like Action Innocence, shows the dynamics between protection policies and self-empowerment practices, that should not be constructed as in opposition but as in synergy.

The incidence of risk is not very apparent but this does not mean that there have been no "casualties" on EuD or Feerik since its creation. Rather it means that none of them made enough of a commotion for uninvolved people to notice, as they were adequately "nipped in the bud". The regulatory pressure seems to be as important as the self-regulatory monitoring, as they build on each other to make EuD into a safer environment. The awareness that the media and public policy campaigns brought about probably normalized, even naturalized, the repertoire of strategies that are commonly used on the platform (Frau-Meigs, 2010a).

The initial question about the correct understanding of the public about privacy and safety online needs to be mitigated by the fact that the scope of the research doesn't allow for an assessment about the overall safety of gaming in general. The nature of the game and of the platform are important elements to elicit trust, but there is the need to gather more evidence about the choice of a nonviolent game as a determinant of behaviour. There seems to be a kind of self-selection taking place among the Feerik platform players, as they deliberately eschew violent games and choose cooperative fora. Taking care of dragons and of others suggests a type of gamer that has already been sensitized to responsible behaviour and is socially mature enough to pay attention to warning signals; intervening in games to ensure safety of others may simply be the transfer online of offline competences by players who have already developed an ethical mind-set, the "migrants" that train the "natives". The profile of gamers who choose more violent games may not display such socially mature and responsible behaviour patterns. But the advantage of having considered stable and insulated platforms first may serve as a benchmarking scheme to check the repertoires of strategies adopted in other games, more violent, in less protected settings.

If this research were to be extended, it could compare several platforms similar to the Feerik platform by applying the same research tools. It would be interesting to see if actors like moderators and group leaders reappear in the same role. Identifying them might have implications for ethics, because such actors could be trained more systematically in addressing issues of safety, privacy and dignity. The same kind of analysis could then be applied beyond browser games, to MMORPGs, in order to identify key actors and strategies, in less stable and insulated communities and platforms. This could bring more insights on the nature of games, nature of choices and profile of gamers, as important elements to determine behaviour and sensitiveness to ethics.

Further research needs also to be conducted on ways to understand better the strengths and limitations of young people's online ethical practices. There is no guarantee that such practices are really used to test their assumptions about real life situations and interpret real life

experience of risks and of ethics. Their evaluative judgments related to ethics, like good-bad (attitudes) or ought (values), and the passage from sense-making to decision-making must be assessed more finely. This implies to look closely at young people's ability to pool knowledge, to tap on somebody else's experience to achieve a common goal like ensuring safety or experiencing ethics. Finally, the operational and cognitive stages that lead to the connection between ethics as game experience and morals as real-life reference via the human rights framework have to be better evaluated, as ethics cannot be reduced to self-regulation, and conversely, human rights cannot just be enforced via regulations and sanctions.

Notes

1   The ethnographic research in this paper was fully conducted by Divina Meigs, "the young player as informant", under the supervision of Mr. Daemon, teacher of Information Technology in a Global Society at Ecole Bilingue Jeannine Manuel, in Paris, in order to complete her Extended Essay for the International Baccalaureate. The additional theoretical and ethical remarks have been added since the completion of the paper by Divina Frau-Meigs, who is conducting research on the online ethical practices of young people, from the perspective of social cognition.

2   For the sake of privacy and safety, all the respondents pseudos have been anonymized.

3   As all original interviews were conducted in French, the most pertinent points only are translated.

4   Posted by modo (old admin). Retrieved September 20, 2008, from http://www.elevezundragon.com/forum/viewtopic.php?id=1052.

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  - http://www.elevezundragon.com/forum (for scripted interactions)
  - http://blog.feerik.com (for scripted interactions)
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