Becoming a Good Digital Citizen
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When I reflect on my youth, I have very strong memories of being constantly in trouble. I don't know if I was necessarily a bad kid, but I absolutely caused my family to be on guard all the time. Deep down, I have always wanted to be a criminal mastermind. That wish, coupled with a very active imagination, has led me down a road of pranks, booby traps, elaborate tales and ultimately trouble. Turns out it's not funny to throw rocks at moving cars or fake your own death while your mom is at the grocery store. But it was funny to me.

It also turns out that it is not nice to trip people and laugh at them when they fall or to yank their pants down in front of a large crowd. I was labeled a bad person when I tried to have my second grade teacher fired for smoking, and accused of negligence because I didn't own up to leaving my new jacket (which I begged my mother to buy) out in the rain, where it got destroyed. But in my mind, it was a perfectly logical way to avoid getting in trouble.

I can remember knowing that what I wanted to do was wrong, yet knowing that I would somehow think of a way to do it anyway if I could just construct a scenario in which doing it was acceptable. Always looking for the exception to the rule. This behavior got me removed from the public school system throughout elementary and middle school, high school and even college. And each attempt at placing me in an institutionalized environment lead to my being politely asked to go somewhere else. But in my mind I had done nothing wrong, I had only done what I wanted, in many cases just to find out what would happen. After all, what could anybody possibly do about it?

As a kid, you can get away with a lot of things that you cannot as an adult. A kid can light a yard on fire, hit a fellow student in the face with a yellow metal Tonka truck, publicly humiliate someone, make prank calls for hours, stick gum in keyholes, tell your sister she was found in a toilet and is therefore not really a member of the family, fake your own death, cheat on tests, lie, assume a false identity, drive a car into a house before the age of ten, peep into people's windows, build sand castles in golf course sand traps, swap horseradish for mayonnaise, tell someone to smell your finger, and do it all with relatively little punishment. What can happen? You get time-out, grounded for a few days or spanked, but it is no big deal. Sure, nobody will see you as a good citizen, but…

But it was funny to me—until the punishment for implementing my elaborate schemes or childish impulses began to jeopardize my future. Despite the utility I gained from breaking the rules or enacting revenge, the incentive to do so decreased when I found out exactly what "they" could possibly do to me.

The Mind of a Prankster

My mother, a stay-at-home Christian mom with four children that she loved very much (never showing favorites), raised her children to know right from wrong, or at least her perceptions of right and wrong. From a very early age, I knew that what she was describing to me as wrongful behavior was exactly the behavior that I wanted to enact. The problem was that my mother did what she said she would do to me if I broke the rules. There was a clear hierarchy of punishment for each rule broken, which ranged from getting spanked to—the ultimate punishment—being sent to my bedroom to await punishment from my father. "He'll deal with you…"

Living in this environment forced me to think about my actions and the repercussions of getting caught. Break the rules and get away with it, or break the rules and deal with the punishment when you get caught, it didn't matter—it became a game to me. One of my favorite memories is when my mother asked me if I had done something and my response was, "No Ma'am, I have an alibi." She looked at me and said, "First of all, the fact that you have an alibi means you are

guilty, and how does a nine year old even know what an alibi is. Go to your room until your father gets home. He'll deal with you." Sigh…

For the first 25 years of my life this was my frame of mind: learn the rules, figure out how to break them and get away with it, or keep pushing at all authority until you find out their boundaries and play in that space. I knew I could get away with it so why not do it. It gave me a sense of power to do things that most people were too afraid to try.

And once I got my hands on a computer and the Internet, well, that was a whole new playground with far fewer boundaries.

So, at 27, all was going well. By then, of course, I had grown into the very person I'd trained for all my life. I had gone from modding cable boxes to rewriting satellite smart cards. I "owned" several local ISP, AOL and hotmail accounts. I had gone from IRC to Napster and back to IRC for all of my entertainment needs. I had proxy boxes in Eastern Europe and VPN tunnels into random boxes throughout the net. All was well. Then a series of events occurred that required me to reflect on my behavior and reassess whether what I was doing was cool, or just plain stupid.

At the time, I was a young IT manager, and part-time undergraduate instructor, a go-to guy for young geeks who needed to get access to resources to get things done, and I really felt fulfilled, professionally and personally. Then one day, I found myself telling a group of young students that hacking into an online course to change a grade was not funny or cool. I felt like a total hypocrite.

A few days later, I found myself spending the night in a jail cell for a failure-to-appear warrant on a speeding ticket. That thirty-two-hour stint allowed me the chance to reflect soberly, not just on my casual attitudes toward rebellion, life and responsibility, but also my views on hacking. For the first time in my life, it wasn't so cool to be like this.

The thought of losing my job, my opportunities, my right to vote and destroying my credit was too much for me. During the walk away from county lock-up, I decided to redefine my life and perspectives. I decided to become a good digital citizen.

What It Means to Be a Good Digital Citizen
With a new outlook on life, I needed to discover what it meant to be a good digital citizen. If it meant simply paying for television and pay-per-view events, I was OK with that. If it meant paying .99 a song off of iTunes, that was alright, too. If it meant purchasing my video games, I would just play fewer of them.

I began to concentrate on good behavior, but what I discovered in the process was that there are laws created to stifle the use of technology in order to increase not lost but unrealized profits for corporations. But if those were the rules… Did this mean that, to become a good digital citizen, I would have to agree to these practices?

I was not OK with that. I can understand that hacking into a corporate database, copying customer information and using it for financial gain is wrong, but so does everyone. Here is where I started having problems: the restrictions on my technology were making it clear to me that someone else—a corporation—was dictating my behavior. But they were doing so by creating a lopsided definition of what is and what is not right.

When I was in middle school, I got my first stereo with an A/B tape deck, a record player and an AM/FM receiver all built in. I would spend days with a blank cassette tape in the tape recorder waiting for my favorite set of songs to come on the radio so I could un-pause the record button and assemble my own mix tapes to listen to or give away to friends. It was part of being a young teenager. Remember when the first VCR-plus units came out and you were able to read the TV

listings and simply plug in the 2-to-8-digit code and record your favorite TV show so you could have it to watch with your buddies. We listen to the radio for free, we watch television for free, we trade books with friends. Personally, I detect available wireless network with no premeditation, talk about favorite NFL plays without written consent, rent movies and watch them with friends, all of which are activities that make me a bad digital citizen in the eyes of the law, but which are perfectly normal, everyday activities that most people take part in. Which begs the question: who made being a consumer and sharing things you like with friends illegal? Who decides what is right and what is wrong?

It is wrong to steal—it is wrong to take something that is not yours without permission from someone who has either purchased that item (be it a business or an individual). It is wrong to swipe a DVD off the shelf at Tower Records, stuff it down your pants and walk away. We as a society can agree (for the most part) that all this constitutes bad citizenship. We wouldn't want to be robbed, so why take someone else's property as if there were no consequences. But with information—data on DVDs, game cartridges, etc.—it isn't so simple. It is not against the law to buy a book and read it, but it is against copyright law to give that book to someone to read without them paying for it. But how can information be legislated?

Since the release of the Internet to the world, more and more people have been granted access to information ways that make it easy to retrieve. With information comes knowledge, and knowledge creates opportunity. This is what has been scary for many people who have long sought to control information. What will society do if they have access to information? What will people do once they are allowed access to affordable technology that can calculate equations, store and sort information, transport information, express their opinions, publish their ideas, rally supporters, unite interests? What happens when an individual is able to decide how to integrate technology into their life? We saw what happened when people were able copy their CDs onto their computers—they linked them to FTP servers and published their libraries over the Internet. Then, someone else created a method to sort that information into searchable lists and before you knew it, record sales plummeted, music interest went up and the industry that had thrived on the distribution of artist on labels reacted with legislation against people who simply wanted access to information that could provide entertainment.

Currently, we are seeing a similar fight for the right to transport information from one information provider to another, limiting what we have access to view on the Internet based on price and priority. As the digital video recorder replaces the VCR, we are beginning to see content providers fight for legislation to restrict the consumers of the product from viewing what they record. How are we as consumers during this information age supposed to understand what is right, what is wrong, what is fair and what can we do about it?

A Framework for Digital Citizenship
As a consumer of technology products and information, you have the responsibility to take a stance with your beliefs on the ethical use of technology and information. It is good for you to have an opinion—the digital space has no borders, no government, no religion, no politics. Information is nothing but varying frequencies of electrical current flowing over wires and radio waves resting at times in the form of binary sequences on magnetized platters until accessed by a sequence of electrical frequencies. It isn't until information enters your meat space that the rules of politics, government, borders and opinions come into play. It is during the interaction of humans with information through technology that you must make determinations on what is appropriate. To do this, look at your incentives for accessing technology, understanding information and making use of what you know with what you have.

Begin by understanding who you are and how you use technology. What is your incentive for having access to information or purchasing technology? Technology has always been used to make life easier, to help us survive and to ultimately become more human. More human: building

relationships, providing bodily nourishment, sleeping, reproducing, creating families and societies and cultures. Tools, language, agriculture, communities, these are all technologies that have been developed to increase our life span and make life more enjoyable. In the United States, we have solved many basic survival problems, which leaves us more time to occupy ourselves with entertainment. My dream is that we spend more time learning and forging relationships and good health, but, despite all of our advancements in technology, that still seems like a pipe dream.

So why do we even use technology? Why do we access information through the Net? How do we integrate these two things into our lives?

I am still a manager of technology, and I've become a leader and a mentor. I have a responsibility to myself and my family to be an example of someone who can integrate technology and information into my life in a way that makes me more productive, makes the lives of the employees of my employer less stressful, and provides an environment for students that promotes learning, thinking and innovation. My incentives are to understand technology and information and how they work together in order for others to develop the skills to achieve their goals.

Twenty-seven was a while ago—there is no longer an incentive for blindly challenging authority. But what if I had a different role? What about the average parent who does not get a new computer every year, who doesn't have several iPods and plasma TVs in every room of the house? What about the middle class citizen who struggles to balance life and work? Where is the incentive to integrate technology and information into their lives? What if I were an innovator with an idea for a product or service that could simplify a difficult time-consuming task into something much more enjoyable? What is the innovator's incentive to profit from an idea in order to make her family's life better? Are the incentives for all in alignment?

In digital space, there is no distinction between right and wrong, fair and unfair; there is only accessible and non-accessible. Here are some ideas you can think about to help determine your role in the interface from digital to meat space:

- Should information be free to all? Should information have a price?
- Should we be allowed to use the technology that we purchase in ways that best meet our needs, or should we only be allowed access to technology in the way it was intended?
- Should everyone profit from the creation of products and information, or do you believe that the creator should have a choice?
- Should you be able to schedule your own entertainment time, or should that decision be left to the distributors of entertainment?
- Should you be able to find answers to questions through any available means?
- Should there be classes of people within the digital realm? Do those of us who have access to wealth and health have an obligation to provide for those without, or is it every person for herself?
- Should we be able to choose our positions on these issues, or should governments determine how citizens interface with information and technology?

By answering these questions, you can begin to reflect on your position in the world of digital citizenship and responsibility. The information age is still in its infancy, we have the opportunity and obligation to shape its future for all of mankind. It's imperative that we actively discuss our various points of view and together, as consumers and innovators, take a stand on the future of the interface between information that exists in our collective thoughts and the tangible technologies that we use to extract these bits of information into our human space.

For me, it has been a tough journey. I believe that I have the right to profit from my ideas and innovations and at the same time I have an obligation to translate information in ways that make others lives more enjoyable. I have had to learn the price that comes with knowledge and the

responsibility that comes with understanding how things translate between the realm of information and the world we live in. As a futurist, I feel we have a long way to go to bring the information and opportunity to places that have been denied their potential. As an educator, I never want to censor information. As a parent, I want to ensure that my daughter has the opportunity to explore the great thoughts and ideas of history. As an individual, I want to hear music and watch movies from all types of cultures and genres. As a hacker, I want to know how everything works and explore alternative uses in order to make life's tasks easier. As a human, I want as much time as I can to be spent with family and friends.

My incentive for accessing information and using technology is to make the world a better place and initiate growth and change. For me, that is what it means to be a "good" digital citizen. What does it mean for you?