



# ⬆ Raising ⬆ Good ⬆ Gamers

## Envisioning an Agenda for Diversity, Inclusion, and Fair Play

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Produced in partnership with the Connected  
Learning Lab and Games for Change



Connected  
Learning Lab



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# INTRODUCTION

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The number of people playing video games globally continues to grow (2.7 billion gamers by 2021). Twenty-one percent of players are under the age of 18, with teens and tweens reporting increased time spent playing games with others online. At the same time, there is a need to mitigate systemic bias, hate, and harassment in game communities in order to ensure all youth have equitable access to safe, fair, diverse, and inclusive online play communities. Raising Good Gamers (RGG) recognizes that we have an unparalleled opportunity to shape the future of online play by focusing on cross-sector strategies for raising a kinder, more civically-engaged, pro-social generation of players. By focusing on cross-sector support for the next generation of gamers we can help to change the culture of online gaming for everyone.

## Background

In February 2020, leading researchers, game developers, educators, policymakers, youth experts, and others convened for an in-depth exploration of the forces shaping the culture and climate of online game communities and the impact of antisocial and toxic interactions on players ages 8-13.<sup>2</sup> The goal: develop a shared agenda to guide future research and collaboration to make online gaming communities more youth-friendly and inclusive. A set of questions guided the workshop: How might we develop and support gaming communities that cultivate empathetic, compassionate, and civically engaged youth? What might it look like to develop youth's socio-emotional capacities to positively shape the climate of gaming clubs and communities? What role can the design of games, gaming communities, and associated technologies play in mitigating abuse? How do we build the foundations of a healthy community directly into the platforms and communities themselves?

This report synthesizes outputs, learnings, and recommendations that emerged from the workshop.<sup>3</sup> After framing the nature of the challenge, the report then shares a model of the problem space, describes areas of opportunity, and concludes with an overview of current efforts underway within the initiative.

## Visions for the Future

During the workshop, participants collaborated on defining a set of bold goals for the future of online play for youth, and identified opportunities and challenges for meeting those goals. Youth experts shared their perspectives on the importance of games to youth in their communities, as well as the desire to work side-by-side with the adults in the room to create safer, more inclusive online play communities. Taking the year 2030 as a target, participants crafted visions for the future of online play. "What kinds of experiences," we asked, "are young gamers (8-13 years old) having in video games and online communities in the year 2030?"

- 2 Participation in the workshop was guided by the [Chatham House Rule](#) that "participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." As a result, this report attributes outcomes of the workshop to the collective participants, rather than to any individual or organization.
- 3 The workshop was produced by Games for Change, Connected Learning Lab, and the DQ Institute in association with the World Economic Forum.

Examples include:

- *Young gamers are **having fun**, learning from each other, and learning to be **good citizens of gaming** and online communities. They are able to **transfer** some of their skills and citizenship sensibility **to other aspects of their lives**.*
- *They are **connecting** and **mentoring** each other in online gaming spaces that are **safe, mixed age**, and centered on creation, exploration, inquiry, and friendly competition.*
- *Youth and their parents have a deeper understanding of **digital citizenship**, supported and **taught in a robust way by their schools**. They are finding **reduced anonymity** across all online spaces which brings new challenges and opportunities for how they navigate and craft their digital personas.*

The collective visions, while varied, had much in common. Prosocial game behavior would be celebrated and incentivized, participation diversified, and minoritized voices elevated. Youth would not only be supported by schools, parents, and peers to develop necessary skills to survive and thrive online, but would also take on active roles as mentors, moderators, and role models. Online communities would be inclusive and provide a diversity of ways to belong and participate. Experiences would be tailored to be age/developmentally appropriate, intentionally moderated to build positive communities, and scaffolded to teach social and emotional learning in the process. Any approach would necessarily need to engage youth as key agents of change in defining, shaping, and sustaining the culture and climate of more safe, inclusive, and supportive online game communities.

Youth would not engage in this work alone. Rather, we see them inhabiting an ecosystem that includes *direct supports*, like those provided by families, peers, educators, and social influencers, and *indirect supports*, like those provided by policymakers, game developers, philanthropists, advocates, and researchers. While the specific strategies of each support group might vary, they acknowledge and draw on the efforts of others.

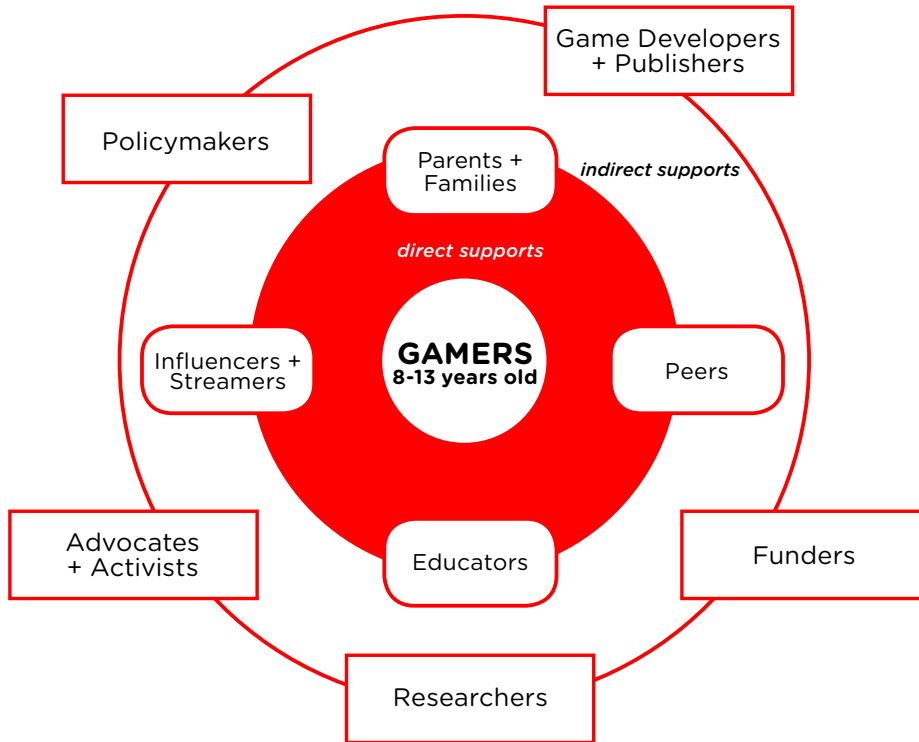


Figure 1. RGG Stakeholder Ecosystem

## Mapping the System

*The root causes of a chronic, complex problem can be found in its underlying systems structure—the many circular, interdependent, and sometimes time-delayed relationships among its parts. The structure includes both easily observable elements—such as current pressures, policies, and power dynamics—and less obvious factors such as perceptions and purposes (goals or intentions) that influence how the more tangible elements affect behavior.*

—David Peter Stroh, *Systems Thinking for Social Change*

Online aggression, hate, harassment, prejudice, and disruptive player behavior—what we refer to in this report as *online toxicity*—has its root causes not in individual players or games, but in a system of interconnections, interactions, policies, patterns, and power dynamics. This system involves many stakeholders with different values and priorities who influence the system in various, interrelated ways.

Consider the following key examples:

- ➔ **Streamers behave badly** as a way to increase their views and likes, which in turn **maximizes their profits** and those of their **company sponsors**.
- ➔ **Game companies cannot fully control** who plays their games, despite Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings.
- ➔ Younger players **play mature games** and **learn through their interactions** with older and often toxic audiences.
- ➔ **Cultural stigmatization** of gaming leads to a **lack of educator involvement** in supporting prosocial and educational **gaming spaces** in schools.
- ➔ **Lack of public access to data** from game companies on the nature of harm on any game platform **limits research and policy** that could improve **safety and trust**.
- ➔ **Online human moderation** at scale is expensive and it is **difficult to get buy-in** from leadership to invest in it.
- ➔ **Systemic bias** in the design of technologies and representations work against **diversity**, reinforce **player stereotypes**, and ultimately **limit the definition** of who is a gamer.

The diagram on the next page captures these and other dynamics contributing to a complex culture of toxicity in online gaming. It was developed from an analysis of draft models created by participants at the Raising Good Gamers workshop in February. While not intended to offer a singular view, the model does allow us to see several key leverage points, or places to intervene within the system. Leverage points are places within a complex system where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything. We can think about leverage points as areas of opportunity for redesigning a system to achieve the outcomes we want, as opposed to the outcomes the current system is designed to produce. If our goal is to mitigate hate and harassment, reduce disruptive player behavior, encourage prosocial behavior, and produce safe, fun, and socially resilient online game communities, we must redesign the system by paying attention not only to its individual components (policy, player behavior, parental attitudes, business models, etc.) but also to the relationships between its parts.

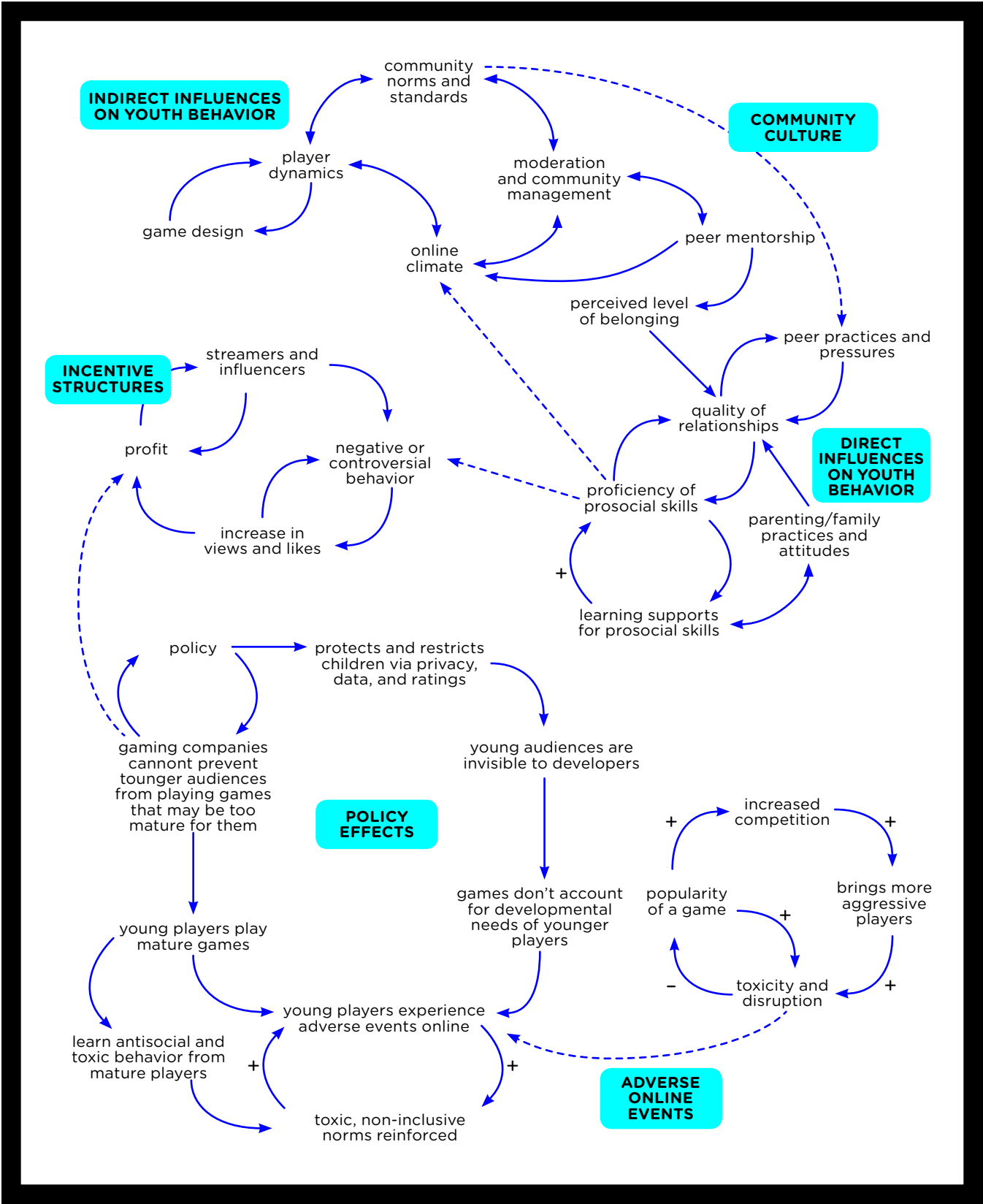


Figure 2. Mapping of systems dynamics shaping the culture and climate of online play for youth

# STRATEGIES AND LEVERS FOR CHANGE

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## Opportunity Areas

Achieving transformational change requires a willingness and ability to pursue a diversity of strategies, spanning education, design, advocacy and policy, behavior and norm change, and beyond. Participants identified the following six areas of opportunity in bringing about the desired change in the culture and climate of online play for young players: policy, revenue models, incentives for influencers, community moderation, families and parents, and schools and afterschool programs.

### Child-Centered Policy

The current policy environment is geared toward excluding children as a means to protect them. Policies like the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) place a burden on commercial game developers who lack incentives to design for the interests and developmental needs of children under 13. As a result, children often end up playing on platforms that are not tailored for their healthy development or safety. A fundamental shift in policy can be brought about by 1) greater engagement between members of the game industry and policymakers and legislators who often lack understanding of the importance of games in the lives of children; 2) stronger representation of youth voices at the legislation table, in addition to trade groups and parent groups; and 3) policies that create a safe haven for children's data so that researchers and other third-party groups can provide an evidence-base to inform the design and moderation of games and their communities.

### New Business Models and Development Processes

While there is an incentive for developers and publishers to eliminate toxicity in their games and communities, this goal is not supported or visible in the game development process. Business models that prioritize profits and result in crushing pressure to develop games quickly means there is little time to innovate around community management and player behavior until after a title is released. Changing how games are developed as well as integrating incentives for combating toxicity into gaming business models may be one way to shift industry priorities and make designing for prosocial behavior profitable.

### Incentives for Influencers

Online influencers play a huge role in the gaming ecosystem, influencing the popularity of game titles and shaping the culture of play. The current structure incentivizes controversial behavior as such behavior garners more views. Brands and sponsors are powerful levers in the effort to shift influencer culture away from one rooted in toxic masculinity toward one that is more diverse, inclusive, and prosocial. Game companies should stop sponsoring toxic influencers.

### Community Moderation

As game communities continue to grow in size and complexity, approaches to online moderation must also change. Current models of human moderation are expensive and inconsistent and automated approaches lack the sophistication needed to support a truly diverse community of players. We need to move beyond a reliance on reactionary approaches that ban or limit



player activity toward an approach focused on shared governance, peer moderation, and positive climate. Possible strategies include incentivizing and elevating prosocial game behavior, establishing and reinforcing clear [codes of conduct](#), onboarding and orienting players to community norms and expectations, developing robust reporting systems that include systems for documenting in-game activity, and leveraging peer moderation and online mentorship.

## **Families and Parents**

Many children begin exploring the online world on their own by the age of 10, if not earlier. Parents often lack awareness about what their children are doing, especially when it comes to social interactions online. If parents have limited online access or do not have a highly tech savvy background, they may not know what to do or who to turn to when their children have negative experiences. Increased attention needs to be paid to 1) helping parents find and understand safe intergenerational and child-centered services and content for their children, 2) educating parents on the importance of peer-based interactions online for developing tweens and teens, and ways of supporting their healthy interactions online and 3) continued work to reduce tensions around screen time through evidence-based research on youth gameplay practices.

## **Schools and Community-based Organizations**

Most online players, including young players, have not been given the tools to engage in civil ways to recognize the impact of their words, choices, and behaviors. Schools and community-based organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts, esports clubs, and others have an important role to play in facilitating learning about how to create safe, inclusive spaces that are models of civil dialogue. To be effective mentors and support a larger effort to diversify participation within games educators should 1) connect to the interests and identities of youth, particularly minoritized youth and girls who often face hostility online, 2) provide access and opportunity for youth to engage in play in safe, moderated, online communities and 3) integrate participation in online play communities into schools in an essential way.

## **Towards More Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Communities**

We see online games, their technologies, and communities of gamers as important and potentially powerful tools for achieving broader goals of social justice. One unifying goal on which all participants agreed was the desire to make sure that all youth—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or experience level—can be a gamer if they want to be. This is not a reality for many youth today. Gaming culture can be exclusionary and discriminatory, reproducing and encoding systems of bias and inequity that pervade society as a whole.

Transforming the current system into one that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive requires a number of different and sometimes competing strategies. They include intersectional work in the following three areas, which include definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion taken from the [eXtension Foundation Impact Collaborative](#):

## Diversity

Game development as an industry lacks diversity, an upstream force that produces downstream effects like lack of diversity in game titles, character representation, and stories.

A lack of diversity in game titles leads to non-diverse player communities, producing and reinforcing rigid player stereotypes, which in turn limit the definition of who is (or can be) a gamer. Significant and ongoing efforts need to be made to diversify participation by creating game worlds, game communities, and workplaces that have diverse participants.

## Equity

Games tend to be used and accessed in inequitable ways, both in the context of schools and families. Young gamers who are part of more entitled, tech-savvy, and highly educated families take advantage of new programs and opportunities more aggressively and at higher rates than disadvantaged youth, for example.<sup>4</sup> Efforts need to be made within the six opportunity areas described in this report to elevate the assets and access for underrepresented groups, and tailor to their needs to correct for underrepresentation. This may mean programs that are girls-only, or culturally specific to correct historic inequities. This approach is opposed to an equality approach that would focus on ensuring the same access and resources to all groups.

## Inclusion

Inclusive game communities provide an environment where underrepresented groups feel welcome and have equal power and voice. Developers, community moderators, parents, educators and others must work to create non-discriminatory play communities. Inclusion may be tied to equity and diversity, but it is not necessarily the same. For example, you could have an online play community or program that is majority male and white, but where a young woman of color feels welcome and heard.

## Research Agenda

Raising Good Gamers is an initiative working toward a future full of positive, inclusive, fair online game communities for youth. One key lever is research. We need to build a richer base of empirical work that draws from fields like the learning sciences, human computer interaction, game design, adolescent and youth development, race and gender studies, prevention science, anthropology, computer science, and more.

One key goal of RGG over the next year is to develop a shared research agenda that can inform and guide the initiative. As a first step, we've identified an immediate need to better understand the current efforts of developers. Currently no systematic work at scale has been done to understand, document, and synthesize anti-racism, anti-hate and harassment, anti-toxicity, and prosocial efforts *across* the industry. We recommend a strand of research that would 1) gauge the extent to which developers are actively designing to tame toxicity and encourage prosocial behavior in their games and communities; 2) identify and share emerging best practices; 3) highlight where in the game development process player recruitment, retention, and behavior (both negative and positive) is addressed; and 4) document and analyze how players respond to features/tools/approaches designed to curb toxicity and amplify prosocial interactions.

<sup>4</sup> Reich, Justin and Mizuko Ito. 2017. *From Good Intentions to Real Outcomes: Equity by Design in Learning Technologies*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

Areas of focus include:

## **Community Management and Moderation**

What tools, tactics, and techniques are being used in community management and moderation systems to curb hate and harassment and encourage positive behavior and communication? How are developers balancing punitive (i.e. auto-banning bad behavior) and preventive approaches (i.e. modeling behavior, rewarding those who help make the community better)? What features are they implementing to build and support healthy communities? Which of these are moderator-led and which employ automated solutions, like chatbots? Research could focus on approaches and features being implemented within chat systems, on training and support for community managers and moderators, and on feedback and incentive structures. A focus on what hasn't worked and why will be important—documenting failed efforts is equally valuable in advancing understanding.

## **Game Mechanics and Incentive Systems**

How are developers thinking about and using game mechanics and incentive systems as levers to either curb negative player interaction and communication or nudge prosocial behavior? These include things like the design of combat systems, matchmaking systems that group players, and mechanics and incentive systems encouraging collaboration, shared planning, or teamwork. Research could focus on how player behavior might be shaped by the interaction and incentive systems underlying their play.

## **Interface Elements**

How are developers using interface elements to shape player behavior? Many companies now employ User Experience Design researchers to help their development teams understand how, among other things, the design of user interfaces can influence player behavior. Understanding how developers are deploying interventions through user interfaces as a tactic to encourage/discourage positive/negative interactions is critically important, since UI design is applicable across an array of platforms and apps.

## **Policy**

What systems do developers have in place for reporting evidence of abuse? What are their policies and procedures for responding to reports of toxic interactions and disruptive player behavior? What policies are shared across the industry and which are not? As the game industry begins to move toward sharing best practices via organizations like the [Fair Play Alliance](#), it will be important to have a clear picture of current policies that can contribute to this work.

# NEXT STEPS

## Playing Well, Playing Together

This report represents a first step in RGG's efforts to help identify areas of opportunity to be taken up by developers, researchers, practitioners, young people and others. Following on this effort, the Connected Learning Lab and Games for Change, partners in the Raising Good Gamers initiative, are focused on supporting four project pillars:

### Youth Voice

We are partnering with young people to elevate and amplify their role in shaping the culture and climate of online play. We are taking an asset-based approach, focusing on the strengths of young people that might not be currently dominant in the gaming world. Our first partnership is with the Susan Crown Exchange Youth Voices in the Digital Age initiative, to develop RGG programming that supports youth advocacy and community organizing around issues of toxicity in online games. Additional partners include TED-Ed, The Moth, and the NY Video-games Critics Circle to support youth media production and dissemination.

### Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs)

We are connecting top researchers in adolescent and youth development, parenting, social justice, game user research, and online play with youth-serving organizations and game developers to drive innovation. We hope to establish 2 to 3 RPPs between top researchers and game companies, youth serving organizations, and policy or advocacy groups each year. RPPs will lead to stronger integration of evidence-based practices into games and community platforms, a better understanding of the needs of researchers and developers around the collection and use of children's data, opportunities to pilot potential interventions, and academic and industry publications.

### Industry Convenings

We are building alliances and bringing developers into conversation with one another to surface and share best practices. Our goal is to increase collaboration so that data, policies, and technology can be shared openly across industry, the public sector, and academia. We anticipate holding 3 to 4 cross-sector convenings per year that will provide increased visibility of RGG's mission and vision; opportunities to establish new research-practice partnerships; outputs such as recordings, publications, and reports; and a platform for youth advocacy and voice.

### Communications

We are developing media, messaging, and publishing reports to advance our agenda and activate participation. In addition, RGG communications will serve to educate key stakeholders, provide a platform for youth and other underrepresented voices, raise funds for programs, partnerships, and research, and catalyze cross-sector participation.

We have an obligation to ensure that as online games become more social and take on a role as the public square, and as young people grow up and through online game environments, we learn both from lessons of the past and also from promising visions of the future. Visit [raisinggoodgamers.com](https://raisinggoodgamers.com) to learn more.

## Raising Good Gamers Leadership

Katie Salen Tekinbaş, Professor of Informatics at UC Irvine and member of the Connected Learning Lab and Susanna Pollack, President of Games for Change, lead the Raising Good Gamers initiative.

**Connected Learning Lab** at UC Irvine is dedicated to studying and mobilizing learning technologies in equitable, innovative, and learner-centered ways. Connected learning is a uniquely interdisciplinary and cross-sector approach that brings together the learning sciences, social sciences, design, informatics, and computing to develop new research frameworks, engage in pressing real world problems, and develop and test breakthrough innovations. The CLL investigates both formal and informal learning settings, and supports connection and alliance building across varied institutions and sectors.

Founded in 2004, **Games for Change** promotes games as powerful drivers of social impact through community leadership, educational programs, festivals, challenges, public arcades, and game production. G4C brings together organizations and individuals to grow the field of impact games, incubate new projects, and provide venues for the exchange of ideas and resources. G4C specializes in bringing together funders, content specialists, gaming experts, and researchers to create successful and sustainable projects.

## Raising Good Gamers Workshop Participants

Christan Balch, *Scratch*  
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Mx. J Collins, *GG+*  
Dr. Katie Davis, *University of Washington*  
Sara Dewitt, *PBS Kids Digital*  
Mark Ferrell, *Scratch*  
Lynn Fiellin, MD, *Yale Center for Health & Learning Games*  
Abi Fidler, *Boys & Girls Clubs*  
Scott Gerwin, *Google Stadia*  
Kishonna Gray, *University of Illinois Chicago*  
Tali Horowitz, *Common Sense Media*  
Steve Isaacs, *Bernards Township Schools*  
Mimi Ito, *UC Irvine*  
Daniel Kelley, *Anti-Defamation League*

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