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Abstract:

### Solving the Problem of Maria: Girls in Washington Heights Play a Digital Badge Game

Margaret Mead famously proposed that adolescence; a time of rebellion, angst, and irrational decision-making, is a Western cultural construction. Many adolescents in New York City are a “problem” (in that they often fail in school) and also cause problems outside of schools (by doing bad things like getting pregnant, taking drugs, and hanging out in the streets). Today, dozens of non-profit programs allocate millions of private-sector donated funds to “help” “at-risk” teenagers by promoting positive behavior change. Programs that include peer mentoring, tutoring, financial education, career building workshops, and crime prevention, all exist to keep adolescents from doing exactly what our American culture *expects* them to do. A new trend is to use social networking to prevent bad behavior in creative ways. One NYC-based non-profit reached out to adolescents using a 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology called a “digital badge” game. Touting quantifiable results in increased knowledge base as well as behavior change, digital badges reward players with points after they complete missions in the “real world” and upload them to the game, showing that they are, indeed, improving their behavior. This is a unique form of subtle behavior modification and warrants further examination.

The game I chose to study, “Girl Power” calls this “playing for real” and was designed with New York City adolescents in mind. The game makers believe their game will inspire girls to make healthy lifestyle choices, build positive self-esteem, and avoid risky behavior. This research follows six adolescent Latinas as they play Girl Power in an uptown Manhattan community center. The girls play the game, but not necessarily how the game makers intended. Will the game “prove” that this group of girls will escape adolescence successfully, and indeed pull themselves out of the “cycle of poverty?” My preliminary answer is no; one game will not “fix” adolescence and eradicate poverty in New York City. However, when I observed teens playing Girl Power a computer lab became a safe space for girls to do what they love, listen to loud music, watch YouTube clips and gush about their crushes.