INTRODUCTION OF "SHİNKENZEMİ 84 NET" PROJECT

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This paper reports on the communication of junior high school students in a digital network community. As a part of Shinkenzemi's projects, an experiment with 7th graders was held in order to study their points of view on the media and the possibility of values offered through the network. (* 84 Net refers to the network of middle school students born in 1984.)

Shinkenzemi and the Media

Shinkenzemi is a correspondence education program for self study at home intended for children aged up to 18 and has 3,900,000 students at present. In the basic system, teaching materials such as lesson texts and exercise work sheets are delivered every month. The children study, using the texts, and hand in the exercises to be corrected. "Akapen (red pen) teachers" carefully correct each paper, pointing out mistakes and weaknesses and praising good work, before sending them back.

With the aim of improving children's grades, Shinkenzemi started as a home study program with reference books and exercise work sheets personally corrected by Akapen teachers. Over time, in answering the children's needs, its services have been expanded to support all areas of life. It offers information not only on studies but on extracurricular activities to help students enjoy school to the full, and to decide which school to attend in the future.

When Shinkenzemi had only educational materials, it was unable to enter the children's lives and communication. By including topics such as fads, sports, club activites, love and music in magazine-like media, communication was stimulated and friendship arose between members.

Also, in respect of studies, there are many areas where visual images with movement are much more efffective than long explanations with texts to enhance understanding, for example in explaining electric current and showing three-dimensional figures.

In the same way, in order to meet children's needs in studies and life, Shinkenzemi has continued to improve problem-solving by offering more values through the application of new media. These developments have led to an increase of members and expansion of services.

Changes in the Environment of Children

In order to further expand the values which are being provided, changes in the environment of children and their consciousness were studied. The uniform standards that were indispensable during the period of high economic growth have already collapsed, and children now intuitively understand that getting into a good school with good grades does not necessarily lead to happiness. Also, Japan's drive to achieve economic growth and catch up with the West, and the educational system producing a homogenous work force, can be considered to have had a destructive influence on local communities. Children no longer have the means to express themselves other than the "self at school" which is most appreciated both at home and school. In the context of these environmental changes, children will need to learn how to make their own life decisions. For this, it is necessary for more persons to pursue the Desire for Personal Realization set forth in Maslow's Five Stages of Desire, according to their individualities and values; and as persons with diverse values influence one another, they are able to develop greater self-awareness and fulfill their wishes and dreams. A society or a forum where this is possible must be created.

The Aim of Shinkenzemi and the Network Media

Shinkenzemi believes that they should attempt a shift from communication focused on producing outcome to communication that helps members discover together, learn together, exchange ideas together, and foster their own values. From this point of view, it sought to offer children a community, namely a forum and a process by child they are able to encounter diverse values, learn through them and create their own. For this, it deliberately avoids fixing or directing starting points and goals, but provides a forum, accompany it to the utmost at all times, and watches over the customers affectionately. To realize this objective, it is necessary to have a medium that allows users to make friends, that deepens mutual feelings, that discovers differences, that enables communication between many people and links those with information and those without. The network, therefore, is necessary.

84 Net Experiment

Children in their mental growth period, junior and senior high school students in particular, have extremely strong bonds with friends of their own age group with whom they grow up and have a sense of unconditional solidarity. It is important for them to communicate with these friends. How wonderful it would be if the members experiencing Shinkenzemi were able to communicate and become precious friends with each other! This cannot be accomplished on a

open network where people of different ages and positions are able to participate. To find out how much about the world of network junior high school students understand, and whether there will be an interaction of values, a communication experiment was done. Approximately 700 members who were born in 1984 and were in seventh grade in 1997 participated in this experiment, held for three months from June until August 1989.

Functions Prepared for the Experiment

Original communication software was developed so that students who were unfamiliar with computers could easily express their feeling. The basic function is a mailer. Expressiveness is strengthened: for example, users can write not only texts but also simple illustrations, choose the design of the writing pad, and press "feeling stamps" to express feelings and messages ("top news! come on, everybody!"). Besides that, a function was added for questioning Akapen teachers and reading the answers.

To make this software easier to understand, it is supposed that reading and writing e-mail is done in the user's own room on the desktop, and that the forms of communication, or the digital conference rooms, are at the school where everyone gathers, called "Challenge-ga-oka Junior High School" outside the window of the room.

Bulletin Board and Rooms

The following bulletin board and rooms were opened and operated at the school.

- Nandemo (anything) Bulletin Board: a board for classified ads, news. etc.
- Study Club: a forum for reducing insecurity by information-sharing and cooperating to solve problems.
- Sports Club: Serious team sports start from junior high school. A forum to share feelings about team sports and solve troubles.
- Comics Club: a forum for talking with people of the same generation.
- TV-lovers Club: a forum where anyone is welcome to talk.
- Game Club: a forum to talk about games. This room was set up during the period, because of the enthusiasm of the children.
- Boys' & Girls' Locker Rooms: a forum for chatting. Separate rooms were set in order to see the differences in gender.
- 84 Net Club: a forum to stage the ending of this time-limited experiment and talk about 84 Net and the future. This room was set up in the final period of the experiment.

The Operation of the Rooms

The rooms were operated by two system operators, set as the chief directors of each club.

The operation gave the most consideration to independence, self-advancement, influence from others, and feeling of belonging, and tried to ensure that the participants learnt to do the following:

• recognize the forum as a public space and have good manners
• have their own comments in feedback to others' comments
• have feelings of appreciation
• make proposals among themselves and act them out
• involve others

In order to keep the network healthy, all comments were checked. Those with problems were deleted, and the writer was contacted so that the reason of inadequacy was understood. Further consideration was given to sad matters on asking the chief directors to propose or set rules on the subject in order to keep the space comfortable for learning.

The Results of the Experiment

Since the program was designed so that the user had to make a comment in order to receive e-mail, there was concern about the case when nobody made any comments. However, the start went smoothly with comments on the bulletin board about self-introduction and classified ads for e-mail and friends.

While some students made friends quickly, others did not receive any e-mail. The difference in each student's communication ability and style had surfaced. In the end, there were children who were fully satisfied with the program as well as some who absolutely could not enter that world.

As the students are seventh graders, there is a great difference in their communication abilities. There were more than a few children who could not find their place in the network world, for example, those who had only standard topics to share with their new friends and lost their words after a while, or those who were unable to write the required replies and lost interest.

The numbers of users and comments in each room are as follows:

		no of users
1	Manga Club	112
2	Girls' Locker Room	106
3	Game Club	93
4	TV-lovers' Club	71
5	Study Club	69
6	Sports Club	68
7	84 Net Club	46
8	Boys' Locker Room	37

	no of comments
1 Manga Club	1229
2 Study Club	1013
3 Girls' Locker Room	956
4 TV-lovers' Club	591
5 Game Club	567
6 Sports Club	456
7 Boys' Locker Room	409
8 84 Net Club	262

70% of the students answered that they were satisfied with the rooms.

Examples of Comments and Their Effects

Example 1

Within the comments made at the Study Club, there were, signs of regional differences. This could be felt through the notes on final exams, information exchange on test problems, janken, dialects, length of summer vacation, etc. The club can be thought to have acted as a forum for problem solving.

#373 "To those who have already finished the finals"
"Sports test is going to be on the phys-ed exam" it says. "Someone tell me what that is!!"

#375 "Phys-ed: actual test question"
Q. How many exercises are there in Radio Exercise No. 2, including the deep breathing?
This is a hard one. I kept on going over the Radio Exercise in my head, over and over again...

#384 "To those who have already finished the finals" Reply.
At our school, we only had the physical strength test in the exam, but
"What is the width of side-steps?" and
"Which of the following is flexibility?" were on the test.

#789 "Let's compare dialects"
Let's make a chart comparing dialects from all over Japan. They say it's going to become the era of power decentralization, so I think we should do more research on provincial identity and characteristics. Standard language might be important for making points understood correctly, but I think it's good that there should be many kinds of expressions, and it's more fun.

#825 "Interesting dialects wanted"
Where I live, when we do "janken", after the standard "Goo, Jankenpon, Aikodesho", if it keeps on going even, we repeat, "Jisshinke" "Hitsukoine" "Jankenpon"!

I have no idea what "Jisshinke" means!
If anybody knows, please tell me!
Note: "Hitsukoi" is "Shitsukoi" (persistent) in Hiroshima.

#831 "Interesting dialects wanted"
I don't know if this is included in dialects...
At my elementary school (in Tokyo), we start with the normal "Janken, pon!" If it's a tie, it usually goes "Aikode, sho!", right, but we say "Ai, San, Chis!" at my school. Even now, some of my schoolmates still use that. I do too.

Example 2

At the Manga Club, they held popularity votes to comics characters with the system operator taking the lead at first. But as the members got used to the forum, they made proposals themselves, and in the end, they were able to report the questionnaire results.

#626 "What should we do?"
Umm... Let me see..
1. Popularity vote to characters in a comic. (or before)
2. Popularity vote to favorite comics. (my idea)
(Everyone makes votes like "vote for XXX. The Reason is...", and they find out the most popular comic.)
Is that about it?
Oh well, I guess no one will listen to me anyway.

#628 "What should we do?"
I'm for XX's idea number 2!!

#637 "What should we do?"
I want to do XX's idea number 2 too!

#849 "Favorite comic questionnaire, first report"
At present, number 1 is "Slayers" with 3 votes, second are "Children's Toys" "Rurou ni Kenshin" and "Magic Team GuruGuru" with 2 votes, and besides those there are "Doraemon", etc. We've got a bunched result. We need more votes, so everyone, please write.
End of first report.

Example 3

At the Girls' Locker Room, they moved from topic to topic, such as psychological tests, fashion, "my fragrance" such as shampoos, traditional girls talk (a, b, c), love, boyfriends, etc.

There were comments on bullying and worries, and some people started calling themselves counselors.

#??? "Hear this!"
Please listen! A while ago, I got this letter.
The sender doesn't name herself, but I think it's from an older student. It goes on about how the skirts are short, how the schoolbag has to be black, about the hairstyle, etc... Those things aren't written in the school rules though. It doesn't make you feel good at all to get that kind of a note, I mean, it feels really terrible. Besides me, several other people were also named. My skirt isn't short at all, and I have no idea why they tell me to quit being so arrogant. I was really shocked when I got this letter, but my friend cheered me up. If anyone had this kind of experience, please e-mail!

#??? "Hear this!" Reply.
Don't let that kind of thing get to you. White hairbands are forbidden at our school, but you know those elastic hairbands? An older student caught my friend with one on after school, and was told lots of mean stuff. You' re obeying school rules, so ignore it! Cheer up!

#234 "Trouble Advisory Board!"
I' ve got a proposal! It's...
"Trouble Advisory Board!! Corner"!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Yeah!! Worries about love, home, friends, school, etc....
Girls, let's discuss these kinds of troubles at 84 Net!!
Did you know that I'm called the "World's Youngest Counselor"?!
But because of that, I, in turn, have no one to consult with....
Anyone's welcome, confide your worries to us at the Girls' Locker Room!!

Example 4

At first, there were comments about teachers and classmates who were disliked, and it led easily to comments about figures we could identify. For the presentor of the forum, it is very important to keep in free from this kind of happening through everyday communication. For one example, we considered how a comment despising. Playstation would progress. This is a case where the children, by themselves, could state their own comments, discuss them at the conference room, and reach a constructive conclusion that they shouldn't say things that make others feel bad.

#305 "I despise Playstation!"
I hate Playstation!! Play 64! ROKUYON (64)! BIG!!!!!!!!!!!!

#340 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
Why do you hate Playstation? Isn't it fun?! But of course, 64 is fun too!!!

#353 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
... Why do you hate Playstation so much? State your reasons!

#355 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
Playstation and 64 each have their strong and weak points, so I like any kind of game players. 64 was a year late in coming out on the market, pricey, and the price of software was high too. That's why I chose Playstation, which we can buy to under 20,000 yen. Having only 32-bytes, it's slow, but the price was suitable. Of course, I'm still attracted to 64's great graphics-processing ability. Playstation's weak points are that the CD-ROM takes time to download, that we need to buy memory cassettes, etc., but its strong point is that it can handle a large load of data at a cheap price. For lengthy dramatic software needing a large memory, Playstation with its CD-ROM is suitable, and for speed action software. 64 with its 64-bytes is suitable, I think. There are one's likes and dislikes for specific software, but the hardware shouldn't matter. Well, I guess the design of the machine and the controller is cooler for 64 though.

#359 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
I hate it too!!!!!!!! I hate 64 too!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I hate S.S. (Sega Saturn) too!!!!!!!!!!
Use Super Famicon, "SuFami", or Gameboy, Gameboy.
(Why? Well... I don't have those game players, so I can't keep up with the talk.)
"It's selfish, isn't it?" (Everyone got this impression, right?)

#362 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
I like 64, but I like Playstation too! For 64, I like "Mario Cart 64", and for Playstation, I like role-playing games. Of course, there aren't any role-playing games for 64 so far...

#365 "I despise Playstation!" Reply
At first, I was divided between PS or SS. At that time, "Virtual Fighter 2" was popular, and that's why I bought SS. Other reasons are that the loading is quick and not many people have them.

#368 "I despise Playstation!" Reply.
Hear ye! Hear ye!! Playstation is a good boy!! 64 is fun too! (traitor...)

#386 "I despise Playstation..." Reply.
Isn't it wrong to comment that you despise Playstation..?
I think lots of people who love Playstation will be really hurt if they see that comment.
Anyone will get mad if someone despises something that he or she likes.
Even if the person who made the comment did it lightly, there are others who would feel bad.
This is a public space used by many people, so I don't think we should make that kind of comment.

Of course, since this is a Game Club, we should discuss the bad points of game players and software. People's tastes are all different, so it's okay to feel that you don't like something, but don't you think that we shouldn't make comments that would make others feel bad..?

Example 5

During the last stage of the experiment, the topic of personality on the net came up from the members.
Children seem to understand the feeling of the media and the background (how people receive the media) and act naturally.

#0148 "Personality...."
I just thought of this, but I feel that everyone's personality changes when writing on the computer and when talking normally. How do you all feel about this?

#0155 "Personality...." Reply.
I think that my personality is a lot different when writing in the clubrooms or on the bulletin board and when writing e-mail. In my case, when talking normally and when writing e-mail, it's the same personality.
Wow! That's such a smart question, it's sooo hard to answer! But I guess I'm not the same at all. (but it might be the same if I'm meeting someone for the first time...) Within 84 Net, maybe I'm more care-free when writing to friends I often exchange e-mail with.

#0187 "Personality...." Reply.
Actually, I feel I'm more frank on 84 Net.
Things that I can't say at school because I would be looked down at on and be called weird, I feel I can say here. (Mind you, I'm not being bullied or anything!) For example, nobody besides the people who read my comment at the Girls' Locker Room knows that there's someone I like. I might be saving my character while off 84... I'm getting worried about myself! But hey, let's cheerfully!!! My heart feels a bit empty. <Twinkle>

#0203 "Personality...." Reply.
I get more quiet here. What? You call that quiet?! People who just thought this, you' re going to be amazed when you meet me in person. I talk in an awkward Kansai dialect even though I'm from Niigata, and I call myself "boku ['I' for boys]" (when I call myself "watashi [polite way of saying 'I', especially used by women]", I get sick), and I'm a bit of a Shinoler [people who act and dress like Tomoe Shinohara]...

#0220 "Personality... a doubt" Reply.
Why do you speak in Kansai dialect? But I'm a bit weird myself, too.
(That's not what you said before! by M!!!)

First of all, at school, I call myself "uchi", "oira", "watashi", "atashi", etc, etc. PLUS, I guess people who I exchange e-mail with know already, but I use "watashi" in e-mails and "oira" in the clubrooms. (Who in the world are you!?) So, you'll be amazed when you see me in person... probably. But, I really want to see you guys. Won't it be possible?

#0245 "Personality...."
Howdy! I cut my hair! Anyway.. I'm not the same at all at 84 Net and at school! I mean, I'm not the same at home (when I'm with my family) and at school. I'm from Osaka and I normally talk in Osaka dialect, but everyone at school so distressing... That's why I can't say what I want!
Oh, oh, oh! 84 is such a comfortable place. I can say straight-forwardly everything I want!

Conclusion

Re-connecting to Reality

Through the 84 Net experiment, one could feel the possibility of a changeover to communication where co-learning, caring for each other and exchanging discoveries are possible. This is a necessity for children in the future. It is hoped that they find this not as a place for escape from reality, but that they feel reality through the participants' presence and make communications with other people's values. It should be a world where people share vigor and wisdom from real life and prepare energy to live through the future; and where everyone is able to share and discuss ideas, feel the power to do one's best tomorrow, to find out what one wants to do, ... Let us make this an indispensable place for children. With the power that the children possess, this kind of a world will surely be created.