

Let's Get Ethical

New tools to help you find and flag ethical interactive media for children by Warren Buckleitner

"It's easy to say, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes." Fred Rogers

The quote above is displayed prominently in the Fred Rogers Center exhibit at St. Vincent College in his home town of Latrobe PA. It's a great quote, and it was selected from the thousands to be put into the steel letters of his memorial.

For me, being a hero for Fred means doing a thorough job reviewing children's software. Over the past few years, this job has become more difficult, as the number of new products has increased, while the number of ethical publishers has decreased.

Back in 1968, Fred Rogers started a challenging career in television to use the medium to "make goodness attractive" for all children. That was back when televisions that were the size of washing machines. Although the children's media landscape has changed dramatically, Fred Rogers' values have not. In my life-long study of children's interactive media, I've found that Fred's attributes for quality in children's media, formed 40 years ago for a different medium, transfer nicely to today's touch screens and game consoles. Based on the principles upon which he designed his Neighborhood, I attempted to create a Fred Rogers rubric with quality attributes: ethical, honest, empowering, child paced, supportive of relationships and well-crafted.

THE PTS (PROBLEM TO SOLVE)

How do we increase the time every child spends with quality, ethical interactive content? That's our PTS, or Problem To Solve (thanks Jim Margraff).

The cause of the problem today is that children's media has become dominated by technology companies who don't understand child development; namely Apple, Google and Amazon. We're not assuming that the people at these companies are bad or have a desire to harm children. But they are competitive marketers who encourage publishers to increase subscriptions and onboarding activities, to increase revenue.

A child using a digital device today can too easily fall into a slippery web of commercialism. In short, the concept of "free" is contaminating the digital media well, diluting the inherent potential of the technology as a quality media delivery system. The work my this rubric was part of a class that I created at TCNJ called "The Methods of Fred Rogers." [And please note that while I work with the Fred Rogers Center as a Senior Fellow, this work is my own, and it in no way represents an endorsement of either the Fred Rogers Company or the Fred Rogers Center].

A THREE STEP SOLUTION

Here is a proposed three-step strategy to address the PTS (problem to solve) -- to increase the amount of time children spend with quality interactive media.



Would Fred Rogers like an app, game or service? To answer this question, I've designed our own Fred Rogers inspired rubric, bitly.com/ctrefred and have started to tag products that pass the simple "Fred Test." If the product passes the first quality attribute (Ethical, as measured by the checklist on the next page), it earns the right to display our "Ethical" seal.

1. Finding. Effectively with the January 2019 issue of CTR, we'll start formally screening new products the Fred Rogers rubric, which is part of our new CTREX Flex Rubric system. One of the six items on this rubric is "Ethical" This simple rubric can help publishers self-assess products, and it will be used by our reviewers as they rate products.

2. Funding. Making quality children's media isn't cheap, but like Fred Rogers, we're not ready to compromise on quality. Why shouldn't our children have access to the best developers, making the best art, music and narration? We're exploring joining forces with a foundation to create a F.R.E.D. Fund (Fund to Rejuvenate Ethical Digital Media) for children. Again, this fund was inspired by the work of Fred Rogers, but has no formal connection with either the Fred Rogers Company or the Fred Rogers Center.

3. Supporting a Market. Money is the oxygen for sustained growth. We want to make it easier for app stores to make a profit by selling ethical products. Our seal will be an independent marker of trust that we hope will be one of many to start flagging ethical content. Once parents trust these ethical products, they'll buy more products from the publishers they learn to trust. As demand increases, so will supply, creating a circle of life for more viable, ethical content on the commercial market.

"Removing all the bad in the world is impossible. So the only remaining option is to create more good." Josh Albright, TCNJ Student, member of the first "Methods of Fred Rogers" class.

What does it mean to treat a child ethically?

It's pretty simple. Ask yourself "would I let my own child spend time with this experience?" If the answer is "yes" you're probably dealing with an ethical experience.

Using our Flex rubric system, we can check every product we review to make sure there is a clear boundary between commercial content and the child's space, which Fred Rogers called "sacred ground."

We understand that defining "ethical" is a subjective process, and that children's media is complex. There are many ways to do ethical monetization in the form of ads, IAP and subscriptions. It's fair game for a publisher to display news of other apps as long as there is a reasonable age gate an proper, developmentally appropriate labeling. Once inside the child's experience, there can be no other agendas at work. No selling, teasing, or manipulative behavior.

What is “Ethical?”

Understanding the Ethical Quality Attribute

The age-old golden rule works well when thinking about making a children’s interactive media product, namely “do unto the children of others as you would have them do to your own.” Google’s original corporate motto also works ... “don’t be evil.”



As reviewers we must teach ourselves to tune into even the most subtle signs that a child is being manipulated for some other purpose other than for education or entertainment, and flag products accordingly. Here are some symptoms of bad practice (aka "evil") we’ve noted in our reviewer’s notebook.

1. Mixes play with selling. Intentionally puts items for sale in the play space. This needs to be sacred ground, and publishers should respect this.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

2. Holds work hostage. These experiences create a context that says "you have to pay up or you'll lose your work." This is a common practice in the business world. An income tax program might keep last year's records locked until you buy the current year's software. This might be OK for an adult, but is less ethical for children, especially if the app is keeping scores or creative work.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

3. Uses a "candy lane." It’s common practice for food markets to place candy within reach of a child, to increase begging behavior when the parents are busy, and the money is out. Ethical stores give parents a “no candy lane” option, and apps can too, by building in options to turn off display ads or tempting IAP.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

4. Uses a timer to pressure a decision. Apps use time, either to let a child pay to eliminate waiting or advancing, or to save progress.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

5. Mixes selling and informing. Evil practice blurs commercial content.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

6. Contains blind alleys. These are point of purchase messages that hide the exit icon, making it difficult to get back to the play without passing through the store.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

7. Primes the pump, or sets the stage, for buying. Apps may use a fake currency (like gems) that is initially free and given to children, but then links this currency to real money, without clear links to the actual cost, presented in a developmentally appropriate way.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

8. Does not discourage accidental purchases with intentional confusion. We’ve seen IAP items that cannot be refunded that cost up to \$99.99, along with special incentives and splashy labels.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

9. Uses an intentionally weak parental gate. Merely entering any date or swiping with two fingers is not good enough to keep a motivated child from making a purchase.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments:

10. Removes adult control over the experience. Evil products remove the control over a child’s exposure to IAP, and intentionally contain easy parental gate features.

High ___ Medium ___ Low ___ Not Applicable ___ Comments: