

THE ENDANGERED CHILD: CHOKING AND FAINTING GAMES IN THE ONLINE UNDERGROUND OF YOUTUBE

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In 1987, a nine-year-old boy named Derek told a student fieldworker in Binghamton, New York, that he and his friends had taken turns putting a rope around their necks and pulling it tight, to see “who [could] choke himself the longest” (Tucker 2008, 79). Having expected to hear Derek speak about active but not life-threatening games, the student felt shocked and concerned. I also felt worried about Derek but knew that such games had been going on for years in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the late 1980s, choking and fainting games, as well as other games involving breath control, were not very familiar to the public. Iona and Peter Opie had identified fainting games as “misplaced audacity” in their book *Children’s Games of Street and Playground* (1969, 273-74), but their documentation of the games had not caused widespread concern. Children and adolescents had identified choking and fainting games by so many different names (including Pass Out, Space Monkey, California Dreaming, Purple Dragon, and the Gasp Game), that it was hard for adults to identify the games’ purpose. Because of the childhood underground — a network of young people that adults did not usually enter — choking and fainting games took place in relative obscurity until the early twenty-first century, when media reports of accidental deaths of game-players became common.

In my article “‘Go to Bed, Now You’re Dead’: Suffocation Songs and Breath Control Games” (2008-2009), I examined choking and fainting games’ origins and interpretations of their meaning by folklorists, forensic pathologists, psychologists, and anthropologists; I also discussed adults’ educational websites and young people’s accounts of playing breath control games. In conclusion, I noted that playing these risky games seems to facilitate passage from childhood to adulthood and asked whether adults can persuade young people to stop playing such games (2008-2009, 54). Building from and expanding upon my previous work, this article analyzes adolescents’ and adults’ interaction based on videos about fainting and choking games posted on YouTube in an effort to interpret the meaning and impact of such broadcasts through the analysis of meta-information. By taking a close look at comments on videos uploaded by boys and girls, as well as comments on videos uploaded by adults, I interpret adolescents’ and adults’ interaction related to this important, difficult subject and explain why young people persist in posting their own videos in spite of parental opposition.

From the late 1990s to the middle of the twenty-first century, more and more people have become accustomed to communicating with each other on the Internet. An important change took place in 2005, when three young computer specialists activated the domain name “YouTube.com” (Snickars and Vonderau 2010; Van Dijck 2013). Suddenly it became possible for kids aged thirteen and over (and many younger children as well) with access to the Internet to upload, share,

and view videos. Curious adolescents could upload videos of themselves playing games with friends and watch videos uploaded by others. YouTube gave kids a new kind of childhood underground in which they could share their traditions and interests with peers around the world.

This online childhood underground is porous because parents and other adults can attempt to check what kids are doing. Before the Internet made checking so easy, it was common for adults to let children learn and play games on their own. According to Brian Sutton-Smith's concept of the "triviality barrier" (1970, 1-8), adults tend not to find children's games and other forms of folklore very significant or useful for children's development. There have, however, been good reasons for adults to try to learn all they can about choking and fainting games. Tragically, many preadolescents and adolescents have died while playing such games, and numerous reports of these fatalities have appeared in newspaper, television, and Internet articles (e.g. O'Sullivan 1999; Parker-Pope 2008; Warner 2005). Choking games involving ropes and chokeholds are high-risk; fainting games tend to be somewhat "safer" but can result in death from head injuries. More boys than girls have died as a result of choking games. The Center for Disease Control's report of 2008, based on news reports, explains that 86.6% of choking game deaths in the United States from 1995 to 2007 were males aged six to 19, with a mean age of 13.3 years. Information about fatal falls resulting from fainting games is more difficult to find, but such information has gradually become available (e.g. Phillips 2014).

Without breathing, it is impossible to live. Understanding the peril of breath control games has contributed to adults' awareness of young people's vulnerability. The Columbine High School massacre in 1999, followed by a series of tragic school shootings culminating in the Newtown massacre in 2012, has enhanced American adults' sense of children being in danger.¹ When I wrote my article "Changing Concepts of Childhood" for the *Journal of American Folklore* in 2012, I noted the significance of the "monstrous child" concept that emerged after the death of so many teenagers at the hands of fellow adolescents at Columbine High School. I also found that Carole Carpenter's (2011) analysis of the "bubble-wrapped child" conveyed adults' worries about safety very well. Two years later, I find that the metaphor of "the endangered child" fits the impression of childhood that has come from both school shootings and fatal breath control games.

Folklorists of childhood have a unique perspective; their close observation of children's interaction and respect for children's own rules result in significant perceptions. Since the Columbine High School massacre, these scholars have paid particular attention to the relationship between folklore and school violence. Simon J. Bronner has noted that since the publication of reports on school shootings in the 1990s, which have emphasized the fact that most shooters have been male, boys have seemed to be more at risk than girls; "much of their plight [has] seemed expressed or exacerbated by circulating folklore" (2011, 149). The higher percentage of males' deaths after playing choking games fits this pattern, which should be studied closely. Careful consideration of YouTube videos and comments posted by viewers makes it possible for researchers to gain insight into young people's performances and responses.

Methodology and Numerical Results

Methodology for analyzing young people's use of YouTube is still developing, since this medium of communication is relatively new. One good study of the performative use and function of YouTube videos is Anthony Buccitelli's "Performance 2.0: Observations Toward a Theory of the Digital Performance of Folklore" (2013). Between September 26, 2013, and November 1, 2013, I did keyword searches on YouTube to find videos of breath control games, searching for "choking games," "fainting games," and "pass out games." Through these searches I found 54 videos: 27 (50%) of all-male groups posted by boys, 16 (30%) of all-female groups posted by girls, and four (7%) of mixed groups posted by either boys or girls. There were also seven educational videos (13%) posted by adults. I took notes on the content of all 54 videos and recorded comments that had been made. In some cases there were numerous comments; in others there were none or very few. I also noted the gender and, if possible, the place of residence of the individual who posted the video. In some cases it was difficult to learn the age, gender, place of residence, and past experience of the people who posted comments. The tone and diction of many comments suggested that teenagers had posted them, but it was impossible to be certain. Some teenagers commented that they had "pranked" their younger brothers or sisters by making them play choking or fainting games while making videos. YouTube is supposed to be used only by people aged thirteen and older, but a close look at comments shows that children are sometimes involved as well.

My search for percentages of video generation was influenced by Martha Linkletter, Kevin Gordon, and Joe Dooley's (2009) article, "The Choking Game and YouTube: A Dangerous Combination," a significant medical study that points out the connection between watching videos online and playing games; it also notes that familiarity with videos posted online may deter some young people from playing.² The study's main goal is to describe demographics and techniques of the choking game; its methodology is retrospective content analysis. Noting that very little information on this subject exists in medical literature, the authors conclude: "There is no causal link between YouTube allowing increased access to videos and any increase in participation and increase in morbidity and mortality. It is possible that YouTube has merely allowed access to previously unobserved activity" (277). Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley discovered that 90% of the participants in the 65 videos they studied were male. In 55% of the videos, participants had hypoxic seizures, but the percentage of seizures went up when participants used the Valsalva maneuver, usually called the "sleeper hold," in which one person puts an arm around the other's neck and squeezes it. In 88% of those videos, there was a hypoxic seizure. Clearly, the level of danger rises when this kind of choking takes place.

In contrast to Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley's (2009) study, my own research — compiled three years later — shows a larger percentage of female participants and only one use of the Valsalva maneuver. In most of the videos I watched, children or adolescents lost consciousness after hyperventilating while squatting, then standing up and putting their thumbs in their mouths. This difference might

seem to indicate a major change in kids' game-playing patterns since the study by Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley, but it seems more likely that the difference in percentages results from YouTube having limited viewings of the most dangerous choking games during the past several years. Some videos that have been deemed inappropriate by YouTube can still be viewed. In the video "Cofer Passed Out" (2010), which I found in the fall of 2013, a late-adolescent boy uses the Valsalva maneuver to make a girl have what appears to be a hypoxic seizure. When I clicked on this video on July 28, 2014, I was able to watch it, although it was labeled with the message "This video has been removed because it violates YouTube's terms of service." Perhaps part of the content had been removed before I watched the video. According to YouTube's Community Guidelines, any member of the YouTube community can flag a questionable video, and staff members work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to remove objectionable content ("Flagging Content" 2014). It is noteworthy that YouTube recommends, in its "Teen Safety" section, consideration of "The Grandma Rule": if you don't want your grandma to watch a video you have made, you should not post it. In this way, YouTube promotes standards that might be found in a family or a small community ("Teen Safety" 2014).

Reading young viewers' comments on YouTube videos helps adults understand the impact of videos of the games on young people. But why do so many kids want to play these games? What questions and worries arise as they learn about the games and think about playing them themselves? Comments on videos show adults how children and adolescents react to the videos while engaging in dialogue with peers and adults.

Defiance, Dizziness, and Danger

Before examining the videos and comments, it is necessary to consider scholarship that puts them in the context of youth culture. Since the 1970s, folklorists have studied adolescents' trips or quests to experience something amazing or shocking that has a connection to a legend (Dégh 2001, Ellis 1982-83, Meley 1991, Thigpen 1971). Bill Ellis observes that when they visit legendary locations, teenagers seek "deliberate escapes into altered states of being where conventional laws do not operate" (2001, 189). This escape, Ellis explains, is part of a broader behavior pattern involving defiance of adults' rules and drinking.³ When I was doing the research for my essay on breath control games in 2009, I found that the same general pattern applied. During breath control games kids seem to be "pushing each other to the brink of a seductive dream world ... prob[ing] boundaries between conscious and unconscious awareness and between life and death" (Tucker 2008-2009, 54). This kind of experimentation is deeply embedded in youth culture and resists regulation by parents and teachers. Simon J. Bronner notes that adolescents tend to take risks and withdraw because of their "betwixt and between" stage of development, during which they may act both defiant and restrained (2014b). In a similar vein, Richard A. Friedman observes that although teens have an "enhanced capacity for anxiety," they are also "novelty seekers and risk takers" (2014).

Like legend trips or quests, breath control games offer new experiences and tests of courage before and during adolescence. Challenges can, of course, take many forms, but the French play scholar Roger Caillois's (1961) study of *ilinx* play — the kind of play that produces dizziness and disorientation — helps us understand young people's fascination with breath control. Both Caillois and Finnish play scholar Marjatta Kalliala (2007) note that children actively seek dizziness, lightheadedness, and related feelings. At amusement parks, young people line up to get dizzy on Tilt-a-Whirls and other rides. The popularity of such thrilling, disorienting rides, like the popularity of breath control games, never seems to wane. Caillois partially explains this phenomenon by comparing vertigo-seeking children with spinning sheep and tail-chasing dogs, but he does not explain why members of different species crave vertigo. Instead, he notes that both *ilinx* play and related spectacles appeal to the young because play is self-rewarding and separate from daily life:

Essential is the pursuit of this special disorder or sudden panic, which defines the term vertigo, and in the true characteristics of the games associated with it: viz. the freedom to accept or refuse the experience, strict and fixed limits, and separation from the rest of reality. What the experience adds to the spectacle does not diminish but reinforces its character as play. (Caillois 1961, 26)

The key phrases here are “freedom to accept or refuse the experience” and “separation from the rest of reality.” We can apply Caillois's analysis of *ilinx* play to the process of maturation during adolescence. Play's creation of a different realm becomes especially valuable during this stage, when it becomes necessary for young people to pull away from their parents to establish independence. This process of separation involves both reliance on parents and resistance to parental control.⁴ If adolescents post videos of themselves playing breath control games, they take the risk of parental intervention, which may lead to unpleasant objections but may also bring parental attention that the adolescents want to receive. Those who post breath control videos show their peers that they have accepted a difficult, possibly dangerous challenge; they also show that they have gone beyond everyday reality to experience something thrilling, unusual, and bravely playful.

There is not much consideration of play's rewards in the current folkloristic discussion of children's endangerment and early death in mass and new media. This discourse, including the subject of school shootings, may encourage playful but dangerous performances on the Internet. Some adult viewers of YouTube videos express outrage and implore YouTube to remove a video because it sets a bad example. Both educational videos and comments by concerned adults have potential value, but it is not unusual for young viewers to reject them. While some kids express horror and sadness about negative consequences of choking and fainting games, others make snide or humorous comments that suggest opposition to adults' guidance. Recently it has become apparent that some teenagers who do not like adults' interference on YouTube are sending their videos to Instagram

instead (Bronner 2014a). Choosing a new site is one of many ways in which young people can keep adults from viewing their communications. danah boyd's term "social stenography," which refers to teenagers' interpersonal encryption, fits this situation well (boyd 2014).

Adults' Educational Videos

Educational videos made by adults comprised only 16% of the choking and fainting game videos I found on YouTube in the fall of 2013, but comments suggested that many kids had also watched them. In my study of educational websites about choking games in 2008, I found that such websites typically presented personal testimony from parents who had lost children, as well as information about the games' extreme risk (Tucker 2008-2009, 50-52). The seven videos on choking and fainting games uploaded by adults that I found in this recent study also contain parents' testimonies and information about risk. In addition, they emphasize testimony from young people who have lost friends or relatives and want to warn their peers not to experiment with the game.

An example of videos of this kind is "Survivors of the Choking Game," uploaded February 8, 2010. With a shocking profile photo of a child lying in a hospital bed breathing through a respirator, this short (3 minute, 44 second) video has drawn many viewers; 300,509 people had watched it by July 27, 2014. Consisting of quotes, images, and video clips accompanied by suspenseful music, the video delivers a strong message: choking games can cause brain damage, and brain damage may be irreversible. The video clips of young teenagers struggling through therapy after playing the choking game convey this message powerfully. Comments indicate a broad range of responses: appreciation of the warning, eagerness to warn others, skepticism, and interest in playing choking games. Missy, a teenaged girl, writes "Thank you for taking the time to help someone." Another teenaged girl, Erica, comments, "I did it don't do the after symptoms aren't fun. DON'T DO IT! Nykro, whose gender is unclear, writes "my class mate 'friend' almost died of this shit 'choking game,' so guys please trust the rules and live longer." All of these comments express concern and a desire to help other young people stay safe.⁵

In contrast to these responses, several teenagers question the truth of the information in the video. Brad, a teenaged boy, writes, "OK so this video makes no sense at all. There is no proof that any of these children received their injuries from it." Similarly, "Whammy" (gender unclear) asks, "is this real?" and "Jesting" (gender unclear) comments, "This video sucks. It's misleading." Suspicious of warnings from adults, these three young people reject the video's message.

Many young commenters on the video support playing choking games and describe their own experiences in a positive way. Kelly, a teenaged girl, writes, "I did it, and I'm fine! Just hurt my nose a little bit. The vids up on my challenge." Similarly, Julius, a teenaged boy, comments, "This is bullshit. I've done it a hundred times and never gotten hurt." Sara, a teenaged girl, goes a step farther, explaining why she enjoys playing choking games: "its really addicting, you guys don't know the amazing feeling it brings unless you try it." Brian, a teenaged

boy, offers vivid details: “did this shit and my vision was shaking + it was like I was reborn like a new me, all the birds and light and sounds. THIS SHIT GOOOOOO00D.” His comment shows that, like some takers of hallucinogenic drugs, teenagers playing choking games may feel that they have entered a new world full of enchanting sensations.

One of the most significant aspects of this video’s comment section is the interaction between teenagers and adults (see Appendix). When Sandra, a teenaged girl, says that the pictures of choking game survivors in the video do not look real, two adults, Bob and Neecy, assure her that she is wrong. Bob expresses himself angrily, telling Sandra that she has “shit for brains,” but Neecy calmly and authoritatively observes that she knows the parents of the teenagers whose images appear in the video and that her own son died after playing the choking game. After reading Bob’s angry comment, Sandra retorts, “And who are you to judge me?” She does not object to Neecy’s more gentle and reasonable comment. Maybe she has stopped questioning the video’s veracity, or maybe she does not want to engage in further dialogue with an adult who proves her wrong.

Throughout these comments and the comments on many other breath control game videos, we become aware that issues related to belief and non-belief are generating lively debate. Are choking and fainting games real, and are videos about such games based upon true information? Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1973) argue that both belief and skepticism keep legends alive. Comments on choking and fainting game videos display a similar dynamic, in which teenaged skeptics engage other teens and adults in lively, sometimes acrimonious dialogue.

Boys’ Videos

While viewing boys’ and girls’ videos in the fall of 2013, I discovered a contrast in settings. Most of the boys’ videos were filmed outdoors, in the back yards of private homes or on playing fields, while most of the girls’ videos were filmed in bedrooms of private homes. This contrast fits previously observed patterns of American teenaged girls’ and boys’ social interaction: girls are much more likely than boys to have “sleepovers” at which they eat junk food, play exciting games, watch movies, and stay up all night talking (Tucker 2007-2008). Teenaged boys also stay overnight at each other’s houses, but the “sleepover” tradition is more formularized among teenaged girls.

Among the boys’ videos that I watched, two, “Choke Rope” and “Fainting game!!!,” are especially revealing. “Choke Rope” was removed from YouTube between the fall of 2013 and the summer of 2014, and “Fainting game!!!” was flagged on July 29, 2014. Because both of these videos are part of the argumentation on choking and fainting games that has been taking place in the YouTube community, I use them as examples here.

“Choke Rope” is a parody of adults’ educational videos. It was posted on September 21, 2011, by Adam, a teenaged boy, and had been viewed by 464 people when I took a close look at it. “Choke Rope” shows two early adolescent boys horsing around with a rope in their backyard. The video’s soundtrack is garbled, but that problem does not become evident until a person starts watching.

Its cleverly assonantal title suggests the possibility of both humor and violence. The two boys give their video a facetious tone, saying with exaggerated strictness, "Warning: do not try this at home!" and outlining steps that viewers should take to choke each other with a rope. Mocking serious educational videos, they shove each other, knock each other down, and go indoors, then outdoors again. They enjoy themselves hugely and expend much energy throughout the film.

The two boys' video has serious content, however. Throughout their one-minute, four-second performance, they toss around a rope, at one end of which they have made a noose. When they go inside the house, they enter a closet, and one of the boys puts his wrist into the noose. Both the choice of the closet as a location and the placement of a wrist in the noose show the boys' awareness of hanging games in closets and other enclosed spaces. At the end of the video, one boy places the noose around the other's neck, and both stare into the camera. The absence of words here has its own kind of eloquence. Have the two boys played hanging games with ropes, or are they thinking of doing so? We do not know, but the video certainly brings those possibilities to mind.

The two boys' video received no comments at all: no applause, no criticism, no questions. Nothing in the video raises the question of "true or fake?" and nothing seems terribly alarming. The fact that 464 people watched the video and nobody chose to comment through early November of 2013 shows that it had not yet become part of the dialogue on dangerous play at that point in time. Between November of 2013 and July of 2014, the video was removed from YouTube. Its removal suggests that someone flagged the video because its content seemed inappropriate for young viewers. Although I have not found specific information about the video's removal, it seems likely that it disappeared from YouTube because a staff member or a viewer questioned the appropriateness of its content.

The second boys' video, "Fainting game!!!," was flagged for inappropriate content on July 29, 2014. Its poster was League City Stunts, a group that films "all types of things, from 4wheeling to rolling people down hills in tires." The video was uploaded on May 30, 2013, and had been viewed 314 times as of November 1, 2013. By July 25, 2014, the number of viewers had risen to 2,620. This brief, 59-second video is typical of short fainting game videos made by boys. Four adolescent boys stand on a playing field, laughing and pushing each other. Two of them start to play the fainting game, first squatting on the ground and hyperventilating, then standing up and putting their thumbs in their mouths. Two other boys, one of whom looks older than the others, serve as spotters, supervising the two boys who are playing. The two players collapse, seeming to have lost consciousness, and the others laugh. The video ends shortly afterwards.

Comments on this video show why it was removed from YouTube (see Appendix). The first few comments indicate amusement; one commenter pokes fun at the legs of one of the boys. On July 29, however, Adriana, who appears to be a teenaged girl, comments, "You know you can die from playing this game or end up brain damaged." Shortly after her comment, "Music Lover" (age and gender unclear) writes, "Y'all finna [fixing to] die." The following day, the video appears with a prompt: "This video has been age-restricted based on our Community Guidelines." It is possible for viewers who can confirm their age to view the video,

but others are not allowed to see it. This restriction demonstrates responsiveness to viewers' concerns, which is a key aspect of YouTube's ground rules. Since the fall of 2013, there have been increasing restrictions and removals of videos that clearly display choking and fainting games.

Girls' Videos

From the many available videos of fainting games created by adolescent girls, I have chosen to examine two: "Pass Out Game- Mikala and Madison," posted on June 21, 2013, and viewed 12,181 times by September 27, 2013, and "Faint game," posted on October 13, 2012 and viewed 1,726 times by July 28, 2014. Teenaged female video-makers made both films in their bedrooms, with other girls present.

"Pass Out Game — Mikala and Madison" shows five teenaged girls taking turns hyperventilating and passing out in a bedroom. The girls stand against a wall next to a bed. When they fall, they collapse onto an array of colorful pillows. They seem both excited and nervous as they perform for their friends and the larger audience of YouTube. The first comment on this video is part of a pattern that is, unfortunately, common on the Internet: men ogling teenaged girls and trying to get their attention. This comment, "Well I think you are both really cute with sexy legs!" comes from a male who self-identifies as "Steve from London"; he cautions the girls to "play safe," adopting a quasi-parental tone. Steve writes "thanks for the uploads," showing that he enjoys watching pretty girls faint; on breath control videos and others, such responses are fairly common. Comments two through six — questions and compliments — are also typical of comments on YouTube videos of fainting and choking games.

In the sixth comment, however, the young male writer, "Go Pro Hero," explains that, because he thought the game was "bullshit," he "just tried it," passed out, and woke up screaming. Although he ends his comment with the abbreviation "lol," he sounds shaken up. Is he really upset after trying the fainting game, or is he pretending to participate in the game to develop rapport with the individual who uploaded the video? It is not possible to know what he did or did not do, but it is significant that this male commenter wants to find out whether the game is "real" or "bullshit." The "real or fake" question, commonly expressed by young people on YouTube, arises often in comments on fainting and choking game videos. Debate about what is real and what is fake fuels discussion of performances of these games, as in the dialectics of the legend (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973).

After Go Pro Hero's comment, other writers criticize the game and the girls: "Fucking Idiots," "you are killing a ton of brain cells," and "DON'T IT CAN KILL YOU." In comment 12, Caitlin, who self-identifies as an adolescent girl, writes, "Please tell me how to do this!!" Undeterred by the three previous writers' negative remarks, she seems eager to try the game herself. Like the ancient Greek Pandora, who cannot resist opening her box of troubles, Caitlin seems irresistibly drawn to the strange sensations caused by fainting games, as do the creators of the video, Mikala and Madison.

In late September of 2013, when I found Mikala and Madison's video, the video had not yet been flagged. By the summer of 2014, however, it was apparent that

Mikala was trying to evade family opposition. Her video “Passout game — Mikala and Madison” had disappeared from the Internet, and she had posted three sections of the video with different titles. In mid-July, a comment appeared on “Pass out Game — 2 Mikala and Madison”: “Reported a bunch of these btw, you really have been bad. Granddad.” This sounded like the end of Mikala’s subversive fun. Nonetheless, it was still possible for anyone to view all three fainting game videos through the end of July.

The second girls’ video, “Fainting game,” comes from Hayley, who introduces her video with the apprehensive comment “If you are going to pist [post] comments telling me its bad then go fuck yourself.” Her brief, 30-second video shows her or a friend hyperventilating, then collapsing while standing against a bedroom wall. The viewer hears laughter and then, after the girl’s collapse, the words “Wakey-wakey!” This is a typically short video from girls in a bedroom with a closed door, who are maintaining their privacy from parents and siblings while sharing their adventures with a wide audience of young and older viewers on YouTube.

Although Hayley expresses worry about receiving critical comments, she gets compliments and friendly questions from viewers of her video (see Appendix). “Steve from London,” who complimented Mikala and Madison on their fainting game, tells Hayley, “Well I think you are gorgeous!” Claiming to have experienced “*déjà vu*” after playing a fainting game, he asks her whether she has had the same sensation. Answering that she felt as if she were dreaming and does not think that Steve is “creepy at all,” she seems receptive to his overtures. Another commenter, Hizzy, asks, “you got a boyfriend?” Answering “no lol,” Hayley seems to like his question. Both Steve’s and Hizzy’s questions suggest that they would like to get closer to Hayley, and her responses do not discourage their interest. She self-presents as a young woman who has had little experience with men, and, unlike Mikala, she has not had relatives intervene by contacting YouTube. In the ambiguous realm of the Internet, this is one kind of peril of which parents need to be aware.

Choking and fainting games give young people exciting but nerve-wracking chances to test their bravery. The urge to do something risky, thrilling, and heroic is hard to resist, even (or especially) when pressure from adults provides a deterrent. Becoming dizzy, feeling disoriented, and experiencing a briefly altered state of consciousness has a strong appeal to young people on the cusp of adolescence. This experience helps young people feel brave and resilient; they have accepted a difficult, possibly life-threatening challenge and returned from an alternate state of consciousness that seems like another world. Not all kids accept this challenge, of course; some agree with adults that the games are too dangerous. But for those who do, performance of breath control games for peers, in defiance of adults’ rules, demonstrates strength of mind and determination. Worried parents want to stop the games so that their kids can stay safe and grow up to be responsible adults. Both parents and their offspring value progress toward adulthood, but they tend to have different ideas about how to achieve it. In the dynamic performance arena of YouTube, new videos appear every day. Comments on new and older videos reveal concern about truth and fakery, as well

as safety and danger. Viewers who object to particular videos can ask YouTube staff members to remove them. Although YouTube's community guidance system has placed viewer-based limits upon some videos, it has not stopped kids from posting new videos that they want to share with others. As the discourse on safety and endangerment continues, we should remember that young people feel a need to demonstrate their courage and that many of them find enormous satisfaction in peer-based video-sharing.

NOTES

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1. On December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Soon afterwards he committed suicide. Shocked by the massacre of so many children and adults, Americans questioned gun control laws and other aspects of this tragic occurrence.

2. There is no mention in this article of folklorists' studies of choking games from 1969 to 2009, although the authors note fourteen folk terms for choking games in English and one folk term in Spanish, *intento desmayo*. The authors cite an early study of fainting and choking games in the *British Medical Journal*: Howard, Leathart, Dornhurst, and Sharpey-Schafer's "The 'Mess Trick' and the 'Fainting Lark,'" which was published in 1951.

3. Scholars outside the field of folklore have examined children's and adolescents' rebellion from a number of perspectives. An analysis of childhood that contrasts adults' sheltering and spoiling of children with children's desire to rebel is historian Gary Cross's *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (2004).

4. See Roger D. Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle* (2006 [1970]) for an insightful study of young men's defense and criticism of their mothers while playing the "Dozens" in urban Philadelphia.

5. Because YouTube videos are public documents, I have included links to videos that can be viewed online. In this article, for the sake of preserving individuals' privacy, I use first names only and do not identify full screennames. All YouTube comments are presented in their original form, without correction of spelling or syntax.

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APPENDIX

Excerpt from comments on YouTube video "Survivors of the Choking Game," uploaded Feb. 8, 2010 by Carrie (300,509 views by July 27, 2014):

1. Sandra: Omg...people seriously? You believe that all teenagers from this video died? And their show pictures of them?? Really?? Okay i believe that someone died from that "game" and im really sorry for their parents but i really don't believe that the pictures of children who died are real.. you really think that some adults or teenager would go to the hospital and take a picture or video of survives.. no i don't think so.. no hates is just teenage girl opinion, don't believe her because all teenagers are stupid.
2. Bob: Well you're certainly not helping people think any more highly of teenagers, I mean maybe you should work on being able to post comments that don't make you look like you have shit for brains.
3. Sandra: And who are you to judge me?
4. Neecy: They are real kids how can you say this is fake? She has permission from all these kids parents to use this material because it really happened. I know these parents and can say it is 100% real and kids die. My 13 year old died from it as many others have. Educate yourself and do your research if you have any doubts.

Comments on YouTube video "Fainting game!!!," uploaded May 30, 2013 by League City Stunts (314 views as of November 1, 2013):

1. Nicholas: hahahahahahaha!!!!!!
2. Connor Look at those calves on the white kid!
3. Connor: Your welcome
4. Adriana: You know you can die playing this game or end up brain damaged.
4. Music Lover: Y'all finna die.

Comments on YouTube video "Passout Game- Mikala and Madison," uploaded June 21, 2013 by Mikala (12,181 views as of 9-27-2013):

1. Steve: Well I think you are both really cute with sexy legs! Did you feel déjà vu when you came round? I used too. Anyway, play safe and thanks for the uploads. Steve from London
2. Mikala: Lol thanks!!!!
3. Mojave: Why did she fall so hard?

4. Adrian: What's your guy's twitter/Instagram?
5. Johanna: Cool T-shirt J
6. Go Pro Hero: Well I thought for sure this was bullshit never believed the game was real ... I just tried it, bend down breathed hard for half a minute, and stood up and breathed on my thumb. My dogs were pushing me and I passed out I guess, because I woke up screaming what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck with a big pain in my back. Landed on a Gopro case:/ that was terrifying lol
7. Mikala.: adrian it's @smoking*****
8. Mikala: And I know go pro. It's I cool aft ho
9. Jonathan: Fucking Idiots
10. Gentrif.: Well, for starters you are killing a ton of brain cells when you do stuff like that. And I am convinced it's more noticeable because people who play this game already have fewer brain cells than average.
11. Dark: DONT IT CAN KILL YOU
12. Caitlin: Please tell me how to do this!!
13. Dark: whats crazy is she is having a seizure
14. Trinity: She fell hard
15. Savanna: the girl that fell last with the cool story bro shirt on or whatever she faked it well at least it looked like she did
16. Garrett: Yo tell that girl in the white to hmu?
17. Morgan: The cool story shirt fake ass
18. Jzone: because getting drunk is too much work
19. Theo: get rekt

Excerpt from comments on the YouTube video ““Fainting game,” uploaded October 13, 2012 by Hayley (1,191 viewers by July 30, 2014)

1. Hizzy: ok lol you do it to your mates then, you got a boyfriend?
2. Super: How to do it
3. Hayley: hizzy no lol me and my step sister used to it when we were about 13 so there is some old vids from then. Im 17 now then remembered about it so we were bored one night and decided not to do it again :/
4. Steve: Wow, you were out cold. Did you feel déjà vu when you came round? I used to when I did this. Great upload, thanks. Just play safe if you haven't got anyone to catch you. I concussed myself one time! Anyway, I think your sexy, not Bering creepy, just an observation. Take care Steve from London
5. Hayley: Haha I know! No I didn't feel Deja Vu, but I do remember dreaming but I couldn't remember what about. Like when you wake up and you know you were just dreaming but you forgot. And oh dear lol I have never concussed myself although I did one time fall forward and nearly broke my nose haah. No not creepy at all lol