

## The Civic Dimensions of Video Games

In Pew's Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, we asked 1,102 youth ages 12 to 17 if they had played a video game. Only 39 said no.<sup>1</sup> We found that nearly one-third of all 12- to 17-year-olds report playing video games every day or multiple times each day, and three-fourths report playing at least once a week.

The games youth play are diverse. Indeed, in our survey, we classified 14 different genres of games that youth play. Eighty percent of youth play games from more than five different genres. These genres range from sports games (for example, the *Madden* series), to playing music (*Guitar Hero*), to first-person shooter games (*Halo*), to more civically oriented games (*Civilization*). Some games have violent content, but by no means all. Almost all youth who play games that contain violent content also play games that do not.<sup>2</sup>

Youth play these games on computers, game consoles, portable gaming devices, and cell phones. They play alone, with others online, with friends in the room, as part of a team or guild, in school, supervised, and unsupervised. In addition, many game-related activities arise around game play (what Ito

et al. refer to as “augmented play”<sup>3</sup>), including visiting and contributing to Web sites about specific games, participating in chat rooms about the game, and customizing the gaming experience by developing and using “cheats” and “mods.”<sup>4</sup>

In short, video games are now a very significant part of young people’s lives. But in what ways? Although we know that young people play games frequently, the relationship of this activity to adolescent development has not been fully explored.

Over the years, as game design has become more sophisticated and the content more varied, debates over the value of games have surfaced. Media watchdog groups such as the National Institute on Media and the Family warn that video games can lead to social isolation, aggressive behavior, and reinforced gender stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> Advocates of video games’ potential, on the other hand, call attention to the “tremendous educative power” of games to integrate thinking, social interaction, and technology into the learning experience.<sup>6</sup> Digital media scholars such as Henry Jenkins also highlight how video games and other forms of digital media can foster “participatory cultures” with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.”<sup>7</sup>

Although public debates often frame video games as either good or bad, research is making it clear that when it comes to the effects of video games, it often depends. Context and content matter.

To date, the main areas of research have considered how video games relate to children’s aggression and to academic learning.<sup>8</sup> However, digital media scholars suggest that other social outcomes also deserve attention. For example, as games become

more social, some suggest they can be important spheres in which to foster civic development.<sup>9</sup> Others suggest that games, along with other forms of Internet involvement, may take time away from civic and political engagement.<sup>10</sup> No large-scale national survey, however, has yet examined the civic dimensions of video games. Given the ubiquity of video game play among youth, this is a serious omission. Levels of teen civic engagement are lower than desired, adolescence is a time when the development of civic identity is in full force, and, as noted above, video game play has been described both as a means of fostering civic engagement and as a force that may undermine civic goals. In an effort to bring data to bear on this debate, we draw on data from the Pew Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey. This nationally representative survey of youth ages 12 to 17 enables us to examine the relation between young people's video game play and their civic and political development.