

Potential Links between Video Games and Youth Civic and Political Development

Gaming may foster civic engagement among youth. Several aspects of video game play parallel the kinds of civic learning opportunities found to promote civic engagement in other settings. Simulations of civic and political action, consideration of controversial issues, and participation in groups where members share interests are effective ways, research finds, for schools to encourage civic participation.¹⁸ These elements are common in many video games. In addition, many games have content that is explicitly civic and political in nature. *SimCity*, for example, casts youth in the role of mayor and requires that players develop and manage a city. They must set taxes, attend to commute times, invest in infrastructure, develop strategies for boosting employment, and consider their approval rating (see box 1 on page 16 for an example of *SimCity* in action).

Furthermore, interactions in video games can model Dewey's conception of democratic community—places where diverse groups of individuals with shared interests join together, where groups must negotiate norms, where novices are mentored by more experienced community members, where teamwork enables all to benefit from the different skills of group members,

and where collective problem solving leads to collective intelligence.

Henry Jenkins, a leading scholar in the digital media field, has highlighted the potential of the participatory cultures that arise through engagement with digital media.¹⁹ These participatory cultures support communities of shared interests within which participants create and share what they create with others. Those with more experience also mentor others. According to Jenkins, the new participatory culture created by video games and other forms of digital media

offers many opportunities for kids to engage in civic debates, to participate in community life, to become political leaders—even if sometimes only through the “second lives” offered by massively multiplayer games or online fan communities. Here, too, expanding opportunities for participation may change their self perceptions and strengthen their ties with other citizens. Empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context: we learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand the choices we make in political terms. . . . The step from watching television news and acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the real world.²⁰

Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown make a similar point in their discussion of virtual worlds. “The dispositions being developed in *World of Warcraft*,” they write,

are not being created in the virtual and then being moved to the physical, they are being created in both equally. . . .

Players are learning to create new dispositions within networked worlds and environments which are well suited to effective communication, problem solving, and social interaction.²¹

For example, players of *World of Warcraft* generally join or form guilds. As members of these associations, they plan and carry out coordinated raids against the enemy. They recruit new members and train them, as well as resolve conflicts between guild members and establish an explicit or implicit code of conduct.²²

Dewey, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, wanted schools and classrooms to prepare youth for democracy by creating “miniature communities” that simulated civic and democratic dynamics. Youth would experience democratic life at the same time that they developed related skills.²³ At the beginning of the twenty-first century, those designing and studying video games are making similar claims about their potential. It therefore makes sense to ask whether video games support or constrain the pursuit of democratic goals.