

Findings

The increasing variety and complexity of video games provide young people with a wide range of experiences, including civic gaming experiences. We find that many young people have these experiences, and they have them in a wide range of video games, from strategy games to first-person shooters. We also consider the social contexts in which game play occurs. The findings below describe how the quantity of teens' game play relates to their civic and political engagement. We also examine whether having civic gaming experiences and playing with others (on- and offline) relate to civic outcomes. Finally, we examine how frequently young people are having civic gaming experiences and whether the distribution of these civic gaming experiences is equitable across varied demographic groups.

Research Question 1: The Quantity of Game Play

The quantity of game play is not strongly related (positively or negatively) to most indicators of teens' interest and engagement in civic and political activity.

We compared the civic and political attitudes and behavior of teens who play games at least once a day, those who play games one to five times per week, and those who play games less than once a week or not at all. This investigation is motivated by concerns that children who play a great deal risk becoming socially isolated or experience other negative outcomes. On all eight indicators of civic and political engagement, we find no significant difference, positive or negative, between teens who play every day and those who play less than once a week (after controlling for demographics and parents' civic engagement). That is, those who are the more frequent players are not any less or more likely to engage in social and civic acts than the less frequent players.

On six of the eight indicators, we find no significant differences between teens who play one to five times a week and teens who play less than once a week. The exception is that 11 percent of teens who play games one to five times a week had protested in the past 12 months, compared with 5 percent of teens who play less than once a week. Also, 57 percent of teens who play games one to five times a week say they are interested in politics, compared with 49 percent of teens who play less than once a week. These differences are statistically significant. (See table B.1 in appendix B for details.)

Teens who play every day vary in the number of hours they play each day, ranging from 15 minutes to several hours a day. However, we find only very minor effects of daily time spent playing for two of the eight outcomes. Teens who spend more hours playing games are slightly less likely to volunteer and to express a commitment to civic participation than are those who play for fewer hours (see table B.2 in appendix B for details).

These results suggest that the frequent concerns in the media and elsewhere about the ennui and disconnection among those who play video games for long periods of time may be misplaced.

Research Question 2: The Civic Characteristics of Game Play

The characteristics of teens' gaming experiences are strongly related to their interest and engagement in civic and political activity.

Teens who have civic gaming experiences, such as helping or guiding other players, organizing or managing guilds, playing games that simulate government processes, or playing games that deal with social or moral issues, report much higher levels of civic and political engagement than teens who do not have these kinds of experiences.⁴⁹ These differences are statistically significant for seven of the eight civic outcomes we studied (see table B.3 in appendix B for details).⁵⁰

To analyze the relationship between civic gaming experiences and teens' civic and political engagement, we categorize teens into three groups. Those with:

- the fewest civic gaming experiences (in the bottom 25 percent of the distribution of civic gaming experiences);
- average civic gaming experiences (middle 50 percent);
- the most civic gaming experiences (top 25 percent).

Teens with the *fewest* civic gaming experiences may report sometimes helping or guiding other players, but are unlikely to report having any other civic gaming experiences. Teens with *average* civic gaming experiences typically report having several

civic gaming experiences at least sometimes or a small number of civic gaming experiences frequently. Teens with the *most* civic gaming experiences typically report having all the civic gaming experiences at least sometimes as well as some civic gaming experiences frequently.

Compared with infrequent gamers, teens who most frequently (top 25 percent) have civic gaming experiences seek out political or current events information. Seventy percent, for example, go online to get information about politics or current events, compared with 55 percent who have infrequent or no civic gaming experiences (see table 2). They also more often raise money for charity, say they are interested in politics, have attempted to persuade someone to vote a particular way, and are more likely to have protested or demonstrated.⁵¹ Those teens who report average amounts (middle 50 percent of users) fall in between frequent and infrequent civic gamers in their levels of civic engagement (see table 2).

Research Question 3: The Social Context of Game Play

Playing games with others in person is related to civic and political engagement.

Teens who play games socially (a majority of teens) are more likely to be civically and politically engaged than teens who play games primarily alone. Among teens who play alongside others in the same room,

- 64 percent have raised money for charity, compared with 55 percent of those who play alone;

Table 2

Teens with more civic gaming experiences are more engaged in civic and political life

Civic and Political Commitments	Teens with Fewest Civic Gaming Experiences (bottom 25%)	Teens with Average Civic Gaming Experiences (middle 50%)	Teens with Most Civic Gaming Experiences (top 25%)
Go online to get information about politics or current events	55	64*	70*
Give or raise money for charity	51	61*	70*
Say they are committed to civic participation	57	61	69*
Say they are interested in politics	41	56*	61*
Stay informed about political issues or current events	49	59*	60*
Volunteer	53	54	55
Persuade others how to vote in an election	17	23	34*
Have participated in a protest march or demonstration	6	7	15*

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, Nov. 2007–Feb. 2008. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.

* Indicates a statistically significant difference compared to teens with the fewest civic gaming experiences.

- 65 percent go online to get information about politics, compared with 60 percent of those who play alone;
- 64 percent are committed to civic participation, compared with 59 percent of those who play alone;
- 26 percent have tried to persuade others how to vote in an election, compared with 19 percent of those who play alone.

Interestingly, this relationship only holds when teens play alongside others in the same room. Teens who play games with others online are not statistically different in their civic and political engagement from teens who play games alone (see table B.4 in appendix B).

We were curious as to whether the lack of relationship between civic engagement and playing with others online was due to the depth of interactions that occur online. Playing with others online can be a fairly weak form of social interaction, where two players never speak or interact and play only for a short time. It may also include longer and more sustained networks where players join a guild and play games in an ongoing and coordinated fashion. Researchers suggest that the more intensive form of online socializing, for example, in a guild can offer many of the benefits of offline civic spaces that less-intensive online social play may not.⁵² To shed light on this issue, we compared those who participate in guilds with those who play alone only. We find no difference between the two groups' level of civic and political engagement. The relationship between guild membership and two civic outcomes (volunteering and raising money for charity) are marginally significant ($p < .10$) (see table B.5 in appendix B). We should point out, however, that organizing and managing game groups or guilds was one

of our civic gaming experiences and was associated with greater civic and political engagement.

Youth who socially interact around the game (commenting on Web sites, contributing to discussion boards) are more engaged civically and politically.

Among teens who write or contribute to Web sites or discussion boards related to the games they play, 74 percent are committed to civic participation, compared with 61 percent of those who play games but do not contribute to these online gaming communities. They are also more likely to raise money for charity, stay informed about political events, express interest in politics, try to persuade others to vote in a certain way, and attend protests or demonstrations (see table 3).

These relationships to civic engagement are much weaker among youth who read or visit Web sites, reviews, or discussion boards but who do not write for these sites. We found only one statistically significant difference: among those who visit such sites, 70 percent also go online to get information about politics or current events, compared with 60 percent of teens who play games but do not visit these sites (see table B.6 in appendix B).

Research Question 4: The Demographic Distribution of Civic Gaming Experiences and Social Contexts

Given that the civic characteristics and some of the social contexts of video game play are related to civic engagement, we

Table 3

Teens who contribute to online gaming communities are more engaged in civic and political life than teens who play games but do not contribute to online communities

Civic and Political Commitments	Teens Who Play Games but Do Not Contribute to Game-Related Online Communities	Teens Who Write for or Contribute to Game-Related Online Communities
Say they are committed to civic participation	61	74*
Go online to get information about politics or current events	62	73
Give or raise \$ for charity	61	68*
Stay informed about political issues or current events	58	67*
Say they are interested in politics	54	63*
Volunteer	55	58
Persuade others how to vote in an election	22	38*
Have participated in a protest march or demonstration	8	18*

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, Nov. 2007–Feb. 2008. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.

* Indicates a statistically significant difference compared with teens who play games but do not contribute to online communities.

examine how frequently those who play video games experience these civic characteristics. We also examine how equitably these experiences are distributed.

Many young people have some civic gaming experiences, but few have many.

Between 30 and 76 percent of young people report sometimes experiencing each of the civic gaming experiences listed in table 4. Approximately one-half of teens, for example, have played games that led them to think about moral or ethical issues. However, relatively few teens (typically under 10 percent) report “often” having particular civic gaming experiences.

Different games provide different levels of exposure to civic gaming experiences.

We examine the frequency of the civic gaming experiences among teens who report that one of the five most popular game franchises is one of their three current favorite games. The survey does not enable us to directly assess the civic gaming experiences associated with each game, but a logistic regression that controls for both playing the other popular games and a range of demographic factors provides an estimate of the frequency of civic gaming experiences associated with each game. See table B.7 in appendix B for details of these results.⁵³

The five most popular game franchises are *Guitar Hero*, *Halo*, *Madden NFL*, *The Sims*, and *Grand Theft Auto*.⁵⁴ We find that playing certain games was associated with more frequent civic gaming experiences:

Table 4
Prevalence of civic gaming experiences

	Teens Who Have the Experience “at Least Sometimes” (%)	Teens Who “Often” Have the Experience (%)
Help or guide other players	76	27
Think about moral or ethical issues	52	13
Learn about a problem in society	44	8
Learn about social issues	40	8
Help make decisions about how a community, city, or nation should be run	43	9
Organize or manage game groups or guilds	30	7

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, Nov. 2007–Feb. 2008. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$. Full question wording: “When you play computer or console games, how often do you ____? Often, sometimes, or never . . . or is that something that does not apply to the games you play?”

- 88 percent of those who report *Halo* as a favorite game report helping or guiding other players, compared with 73 percent of those who do not list *Halo* as a favorite;
- 59 percent of those who list *The Sims* as a favorite game say they learned about problems in society while playing video games, compared with 47 percent who do not list *The Sims* as a favorite;
- 52 percent of those who list *The Sims* as a favorite game say they have explored social issues while playing video games,

compared with 39 percent who do not list *The Sims* as a favorite;

- 66 percent of those who list *The Sims* as a favorite say they have made decisions about how a city is run while playing video games, compared with 42 percent who do not list *The Sims* as a favorite.

It is interesting that playing *Halo* is associated with helping or guiding other players. Few likely think of *Halo* as a civically oriented game. *Halo* is a science fiction, first-person shooter game where players must battle to save humankind. That *Halo* players more commonly help and guide other youth speaks to an important observation of new media scholars—that some of the social interactions around certain video games can provide civic gaming experiences.

It is less surprising that *The Sims* franchise provides many civic gaming experiences. *The Sims* is a life simulation game where game play is open-ended. Players create virtual people called “Sims” and then must find housing, look for a job, make decisions about how to spend leisure time, and engage in a wide range of other possible activities. The franchise also includes games such as *SimCity* and *SimTown*, where players engage in explicitly civic activities as they build and guide the development of their own city or town. Each of their decisions has consequences, and players confront multiple dynamics associated with civic and social life. *Sims* is also enormously popular—it is the best-selling PC game in history, with more than 100 million units sold.⁵⁵

Youth play games alone, together with friends, and online with others.

When asked what they do most often, teens are evenly split between solo (49 percent) and group game play (49 percent). Most of the group-gamers play with friends in person, with 77 percent of group-gamers reporting playing games with others in the same room. A small percentage of teens (23 percent) play most often with other people via the Internet. Among those teens who play games with others online, more than two in five (43 percent) say they play games online as a part of group or guild; 54 percent of online gamers are not playing as a part of a group.

Civic gaming experiences and social contexts for game play appear to be equitably distributed by income level, race, and age, although girls have fewer civic gaming experiences.

Interestingly, for civic gaming opportunities, only gender is related to whether teens experience these opportunities. Boys are about twice as likely as girls to report having civic gaming experiences, even when controlling for frequency of game play.⁵⁶ Income, race, and age are all unrelated to the amount of reported civic gaming experiences (see table B.8 in appendix B).