

Discussion and Implications: The Civic Potential of Video Games

With this first nationally representative quantitative study of the relationship between youth video game play and civic engagement, we hope to inform both scholarly and popular hypotheses about the civic potential of video games. The goal, ultimately, is to better leverage the civic potential of video games.

The findings challenge popular perceptions of gamers as isolated and civically disengaged. They also point to a need for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which video games relate to civic engagement. For example, we find that the overall amount of game play is unrelated to civic engagement, but that some qualities of game play are strongly related to civic engagement. Likewise, some forms of social activities associated with game play are not related to civic engagement, but others are. Exposure to civic gaming experiences is equitably distributed across most demographic groups, but few youth have frequent civic gaming experiences. We also discuss how parents, educators, policymakers, and advocates might better use games to provide civic gaming experiences. We conclude by outlining

avenues for future research on the civic potential of video games.

The study's design limitations somewhat restrict the conclusions we can make about the relationships between civic gaming experiences and civic engagement. Specifically, we could not control for respondents' prior civic commitments, and we did not randomly assign participant exposure to games as would be done in an experimental study. We suspect that the relationships we find between gaming experiences and civic engagement are partially the result of teens with civic interests choosing to play games that provide civic gaming experiences. On the other hand, well-controlled classroom studies (although not with video games) find that these kinds of civic experiences foster civic engagement. More important, even when a young person's civic interest draws him or her to these games, playing such games likely reinforces these interests and further develops civic skills and knowledge.

Given that we cannot make causal claims, our comments should be understood as speculative. Nevertheless, drawing on these findings and on findings from related research, it is possible to offer some preliminary implications that can advance discussions about the civic potential of video games and research priorities.

The stereotype of the antisocial gamer is not reflected in our data. Youth who play games frequently are just as civically and politically active as those who play games infrequently.

Our findings conflict with a commonly held perspective that youth who play video games are socially isolated and often

antisocial. We also found no evidence to support scholars' concerns that young people involved in the Internet (in this case by playing video games) are less civically engaged. The quantity of game play, according to our study, is unrelated to most of the civic outcomes measured.

Civic gaming experiences are strongly related to civic engagement.

For those hoping to leverage the civic potential of video games, the strong and consistent relationship between teens' civic gaming experiences and civic engagement is encouraging. It indicates that the same kinds of experiences that foster civic outcomes in well-controlled classroom studies may achieve similar results in gaming environments. Moreover, that the overall quantity of game play is unrelated to civic engagement, but that various qualities of video game play are associated with civic engagement parallels findings from civic education research. The number of civics courses one takes is not strongly related to civic outcomes, yet there is a strong link between civic engagement and particular civic learning opportunities in high-quality civics classes.⁵⁷

These findings are of interest for two main reasons. First, much of the public discussion of video game play frames it in a negative light. These findings show that some gaming experiences are associated with positive civic behaviors. Second, much of the dialogue among new media scholars emphasizes the social aspects of gaming more than the civic content of games. Although we believe the social context of game play, discussed below, is important, this study provides clear reasons to also focus on teens' exposure to civic gaming experiences.

In addition, civic education research leads us to suspect that parents, peers, teachers, and mentors can significantly increase the impact of civic gaming experiences by helping adolescents reflect on those experiences. We draw this parallel from the many studies that have found that the civic value of community service is greatly enhanced when teachers help students reflect on and discuss their experience.⁵⁸ This possibility also has implications for game design, which we discuss below.

Social gaming experiences are related to civic engagement in some, but not all, instances.

A core finding from this survey is that gaming is frequently a social activity. Overall, 76 percent of youth play games with others at least some of the time. Youth play with others who are in the room with them and with others online. They organize and manage guilds. They read and contribute to discussion boards. Social interaction in and around many video games is, in other words, common.

It is important to distinguish social interactions that have civic dimensions from those that do not. If four teenagers play basketball together, this activity is social, but not civic. If these four talk with members of their community about the need for lights on a public basketball court, it then becomes a civic activity. A related distinction can be made for online game play and activities. A member of a game guild might focus on developing gaming skills or, alternatively, could be involved in a guild community's decision to prohibit homophobic speech.

In our analysis, the relationship between social participation in and around video games and civic engagement was not con-

sistent. We found that playing games with others in the same room and contributing to Web sites related to a game were associated with civic engagement, but we did not find a statistically significant relationship between playing with others online or as part of a guild and civic engagement.⁵⁹ We suspect that part of the reason for these results is related to differing qualities of the social interaction that occurs in these different social contexts. Some of the dimensions of these differences will be discussed below.

The degree to which social life leads to civic engagement in society at large is a matter of much theorizing, empirical study, and debate. Putnam argues that social participation (most famously bowling leagues) can help build a civic culture that supports democracy.⁶⁰ Participatory social networks (online social settings where youth interact with their friends and others who share their interests) can lead to participatory civic networks (in which individuals engage with civic and political issues). A variety of factors have been put forward to explain this process. In brief, Putnam and other social theorists argue that social life can foster social capital, which includes trust, social networks, and social norms. Social capital, in turn, is believed to facilitate communication about civic issues, to foster accountability and adherence to desirable social norms, and to enable more effective collective action related to public matters.

Some have argued that particular forms of participation are more likely than others to promote civic engagement. McFarland and Thomas's longitudinal study of extracurricular activities finds that "politically salient youth organizations" (those that involve the kinds of skills and experiences associated with

civic and political life), such as student council or a debate club, promote desired civic outcomes. Youth organizations that lack political salience, such as school sports teams, do not.⁶¹ In general, studies of both youth and adults indicate that participation in groups more strongly supports civic outcomes when participants employ civic skills and engage civic topics.⁶² This finding is consistent with our research on guild membership. Youth who reported organizing or managing a guild group (a civic skill and one of our civic gaming experiences) were more civically and politically engaged in their offline lives. However, those who were simply members of guilds were not statistically different in their civic and political engagement from those who played games alone.

In addition, our findings and review of the research lead us to suspect that the qualities of a given participatory culture will influence the degree to which it may support a participatory civic culture. For example, we suspect that some guilds create more robust and civically oriented social contexts than others. Civic life requires interactions related to legitimate public concerns.⁶³ Thus, if interactions are largely about private matters—how to win the game, for example—we would expect them to provide less support for civic life than if the interactions also included broad discussion of current events. Many other factors may matter as well—for example, whether members of online communities also meet face to face to socialize and potentially discuss civic issues; whether participation in an online community is fleeting or long term; whether members of an online community are anonymous; whether norms of civility are modeled and enforced in an online community.

In addition, if the networks developed through video game play are more diverse than the networks youth would otherwise have, and if the social interactions that occur involve more than a narrow focus on the games being played, then they could expand young people's access to different perspectives on many civic or political matters and deepen their general concern for members of society they might otherwise not know. Social gaming experiences might also teach civic skills related to being a member of a group or organizing a group. We suspect that when social interactions teach civic skills or concern civic matters, positive civic outcomes are more likely. As we discuss below, such hypotheses should be a focus of future research.

Civic gaming experiences are more equitably distributed than many other opportunities that support civic engagement.

Given that civic gaming experiences are strongly related to many civic and political outcomes, it is encouraging that they are equitably distributed by race, ethnicity, and family income. The relatively equitable distribution of these civic experiences is important for two reasons. First, this contrasts with teens' experiences in schools and with many forms of Internet use. Specifically, many forms of Internet use that have been found to be related to civic participation are inequitably distributed along lines of race and income.⁶⁴ Similarly, in high schools white students and students from higher-income households experience more of the opportunities that support civic and political engagement than do others.⁶⁵ For example, students in higher-income school districts are twice as likely as those from average-income districts to learn how laws are made and how

Congress works. They are also more than one-and-one-half times as likely to report having political debates and panel discussions as part of their classroom activities.

Second, civic and political participation among youth is quite unequal. Specifically, much was made of the increasing voting rates of young people in the 2008 primaries, but little mention was made of how unequal this participation was. The voting rate of 18- to 29-year-olds who had attended college was fully three times greater than the voting rates of 18- to 29-year-olds who had not. By equalizing civic learning opportunities, we may be able to help to equalize civic and political participation—a fundamentally important goal in a democracy. Civic gaming experiences may be a means of more equitably developing teens' civic skills and commitments.

It is worth noting that girls experience fewer civic gaming opportunities, even after controlling for the fact that girls play games less frequently than boys. It makes sense to look closely at what may be causing these differences and to consider possible responses.

Few youth have frequent civic gaming experiences.

Although many youth experience some civic gaming experiences, fewer than 10 percent of teens frequently engage in many of the civic gaming experiences we found strongly related to civic outcomes. Increasing the frequency of such experiences is likely necessary to effectively tap the civic potential of video games.