

## Next Steps for Parents, Educators, and Game Designers

### Parents

Parents can increase their children's exposure to civic gaming experiences. As a first step, parents need to be informed about both video games and civic gaming experiences. By being aware of the range of games available and those that specifically offer civic learning experiences, parents can direct their children toward these games. To do this, parents need information both about games with explicit civic content (for example, *Civilization* or *SimCity*) and about what constitutes a civic gaming experience. Organizations such as Common Sense Media might play a role in educating parents by providing civic ratings for games and guides for talking about civic gaming experiences with children. Armed with this information, parents would be able to both make informed choices about which games to purchase and help their children reflect on the civic gaming experiences they have.

Contrary to popular opinion, the games young people play are not all violent. Indeed, as detailed in the Pew report "Teens,

Video Games, and Civics,” youth play a wide variety of different video games (we classified 14 different genres), and these games offer a highly varied set of experiences. Just as the desirability of television viewing depends largely on content (watching the History Channel is different from watching cartoons), the desirability of video game play is shaped to a large degree by the content of the experience.

Parents should focus less on the overall quantity of video game play and more on the content and video game experiences their children have, given that we find the quantity of video game play is largely unrelated to civic outcomes, while some qualities of game play are strongly related to civic outcomes. Although there may well be other reasons to limit the quantity of game play (to make more time for physical activity and homework, for example), we suspect that desirability of game play, in many instances, depends heavily on the nature of the game being played.

Parents may be able to guide and influence the games their children play to some extent, yet it is important not to overstate this control. Adolescence, after all, is a time to develop autonomy from parents. Parents may therefore want to work with younger children to help them become thoughtful media consumers (and to develop habits and insights they can carry into their teen years). Parents may also want to play video games with their children. Currently, according to our survey, 31 percent of parents report playing video games with their children at least some of the time. In addition to creating opportunities to have fun together, playing with one’s children provides a means to better understand what they are doing and may facilitate

valuable conversations about these experiences. Research (largely on TV viewing) suggests that by reflecting with children about their gaming experience, parents can influence how their children think about and interpret the messages and experiences of their game play, including encouraging critical consumption of media.<sup>66</sup> In addition, by discussing political and social issues at home, parents can make their children more aware when they do encounter civic and political content in their video game play. And studies consistently find that youth who discuss civic and political issues with their parents are much more civically engaged than those who do not.<sup>67</sup>

## Youth

Teens often make their own decisions about which games they play. Youth perspectives on gaming and on what they find engaging is crucial if compelling games that support civic engagement are to be designed and marketed effectively to youth. In addition, youth often prefer to talk with their friends about the games they play rather than with their parents. It is therefore important to consider how games can be designed to encourage reflection by teens within the game and within the social interactions that surround the game. Given teens' interest in what their peers are thinking and doing, focusing on peer-to-peer learning is particularly important at this age. The game *Zora*, for example, is designed to facilitate this peer-to-peer reflection. It makes discussion of controversial issues an explicit part of the online community and contains a "values dictionary" to foster reflection on and discussion of values,

ethics, and rules.<sup>68</sup> Studies assessing the impact of peer-to-peer reflective structures are needed to examine whether such practices amplify the civic impact of playing the game and, if they do, to identify which practices are most effective.

Just as attention to youth perspectives on gaming and on what youth find engaging must be front and center when thinking about ways to better spread the use of games that further the civic potential of video games, it is also very important to attend to youth perceptions of civic and political life. Specifically, many have been asking whether there is a new kind of youth politics. In addition to citing increasing rates of volunteerism, proponents argue that youth participation is often motivated by a different set of concerns than has traditionally been the case—that youth prize action that is informal and grass-roots, and that youth acquire information through alternative means, such as the Internet.<sup>69</sup> Although there can be little doubt that some aspects of youth civic engagement have changed, still up for debate is whether youth civic engagement has been transformed.<sup>70</sup> In either case, both within games and in their offline lives, it is clearly important that youth have space to develop their own ways of engaging civically and, along with such opportunities, that they receive guidance and support from those with more civic and political experience.

## **Educators**

Informing educators about the civic possibilities embedded in some games is another means of increasing the frequency of potentially desirable experiences. Schools and after-school pro-

grams provide a direct means of increasing exposure to games that promote civic capacities and commitments. As detailed in "Teens, Video Games, and Civics," one-third of American teens reported playing a computer or console game at school as part of an assignment. The range of games played was broad and included content from math to economic simulations to typing skills. It also included games such as *Oregon Trail* for social studies classes. Although our findings cannot precisely measure the frequency, it is clear that games offering civic gaming experiences can be integrated into the curriculum.

Given this potential, educational organizations and game advocates might reach out to teachers and youth workers, many of whom are unlikely to be aware of ways in which certain video games might support their work. Social studies educators, for example, might be interested in using a game like *Democracy* in a government class. *Democracy* is a multidimensional political simulation in which players respond to varied constituencies, shape policies, and interpret data on approval ratings in an effort to win reelection. Similarly, many global studies educators might be interested in *Real Lives*, in which students can become a different person in a different country. Students then confront decisions, challenges, and opportunities based on the realities of life in those countries. The game can help foster empathy and understanding of the lives of others and teach about dynamics associated with different political systems, economic structures, cultural beliefs, and religions. These games could provide a new and engaging way to teach civics. Indeed, the emphasis on traditional instruction in a civics curriculum has frequently been cited as a major reason civics courses in general have little impact.<sup>71</sup>

Educators can also augment the impact of these experiences and teens' extracurricular gaming experiences by helping young people reflectively engage with video games. Jenkins, for example, highlights a role schools and after-school organizations could play in helping youth develop what he calls "new media literacies." These can support reflection and help youth fully engage in gaming opportunities and problem solve when they run into challenges.<sup>72</sup> Recognizing a related need, teachers implementing *Quest Atlantis* are active participants who guide students through their quest. These teachers receive significant professional development (both online and face-to-face) to effectively monitor student progress and support student reflection and deep thinking in relation to the student's game experience.

Employing a different strategy, at the University of Chicago Charter School Carter G. Woodson Campus, middle-school students are expected to develop the ability to represent their understanding of core academic content through the creation of digital videos, graphics, music (lyrics and instruments), and interactive simulations. For instance, all sixth-grade students are required to learn to create games using *GameStar Mechanic*, a game created to teach students the core principles of game design. Once students have mastered *GameStar Mechanic*, they use their newfound game design skills to create a game that demonstrates their understanding of a scientific concept such as global warming. Noting the potentially important contributions of schools should not, of course, obscure the challenges of integrating desirable forms of video game play into school contexts.<sup>73</sup> We discuss these issues when outlining priorities for research below.

### Game Designers

Game designers, in collaboration with civic educators, could create more video games with explicit civic and political content. Such games may well increase the civic impact of video game play. Research on civic education indicates that making explicit connections to civic and political issues is often more efficacious than placing youth in a healthy community context where no explicit connections are made to civic and political issues or skills. A recent study of the development of civic commitments, which controlled for students' prior civic commitments, found that providing students with classroom opportunities to do work explicitly on civic and political issues was more effective than providing supportive school contexts (for example, a caring and supportive school community or a school community where students help one another or work together).<sup>74</sup>

Such findings lead us to suspect that video games that directly engage young people in discussions and collaborative work that explicitly relate to civic or political issues (for example, about the environment, how to govern a city, or how to fight poverty) will be more likely to develop civic skills and commitments. When the focus of the collaboration is not explicitly civic or political (for example, collaborating to solve a puzzle or win a game), we would anticipate less of an impact on civic engagement. Findings from the Pew Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey are consistent with this. Experiencing frequent civic gaming experiences was strongly related to civic engagement. Playing with others in the same room was only modestly related

to civic engagement. Playing with others online or as part of a guild was not significantly related to civic engagement.

Of course, game design is about more than content in the narrow sense. Games that are not explicitly about civics can be designed to develop civic skills and to promote reflective and collaborative dispositions. Flanagan and colleagues note the importance of designing and rewarding prosocial values in both educational and commercial games.<sup>75</sup> In addition, game designers might want to work closely with educators to design games that work more effectively within the structural constraints of many schools and classrooms, while holding onto the core features that make video games so engaging. In addition, game designers might continue to develop strategies for engaging peer-to-peer learning and collaboration in ways that support civic engagement.