

Research Agenda

Research That Identifies and Assesses the Impact of Civic Gaming Experience

The widely varying characteristics of teens' gaming experiences highlight the need for research that deepens our understanding of how youth experience video games and how such experiences influence their development (if at all). At this point, most statements regarding the relationships between gaming experiences and civic outcomes are drawn from observations of particular games and gaming dynamics, from correlations between playing games and varied civic indicators, and from what we know from other domains where civic education is practiced. Clearly, these are all worthy places from which to begin considering these issues. However, there is great need for more qualitative and quantitative research that examines teens' video game experiences in relation to civic outcomes.

Ethnographic work in this area will continue to be very important. It can identify, define, and examine features of gaming that have not previously been well conceptualized.

Given the newness and rapidly changing nature of video games, this is particularly important. Ethnographic work can also provide a rich understanding of the significance of context, both the contexts in which youth play games and the ways game play relates to the varied contexts in which youth live. Perhaps most important, ethnographic work enables insight into the ways youth themselves view these experiences, providing an important check on adults' readiness to project particular meanings onto youth.⁷⁶

Consider, for example, a finding from the Pew report "Teens, Video Games, and Civics." The majority of teens, the survey finds, encounter aggressive behavior while playing games. Sixty-three percent reported hearing "people being mean and overly aggressive while playing." Twenty-four percent said this happened often. At the same time, of those who reported having had these experiences, 73 percent said they had heard other players ask the aggressor to stop, with 23 percent reporting that such intervention happens often. Interpreting these responses is difficult. What exactly did youth encounter that they viewed as mean or overly aggressive? What meanings did youth take from these exchanges? Clearly, witnessing the antisocial behavior and responses to it could have civic implications. Witnessing sexist, racist, and homophobic remarks as well as excessively aggressive behavior might heighten a teen's sense of unacceptable behavior. Seeing others intervene might offer productive forms of conflict resolution, skills that will help youth to develop respectful communities.

But none of this is clear. It is difficult to ascertain from survey responses what actually happened during these encounters or

to assess how youth experienced these exchanges. If we hope to understand how participation in online communities might shape youth civic commitments and capacities, detailed qualitative inquiry will be necessary to better characterize the range of encounters teens are having and how these encounters are experienced. Such research could then potentially inform the design of further efforts to help youth respond to such episodes more effectively.

Quantitative research in this area will also be very important. The relationships identified in this study between civic gaming experiences and civic engagement, particularly because they align with findings from controlled studies of civic education in other domains, provide an important direction for further inquiry. Currently, however, the lack of controls for young people's prior civic commitments and activities in most existing game research and the lack of random exposure to civic gaming opportunities limit our ability to make causal claims about how games or features of games influence civic development. Longitudinal and experimental studies will enable stronger claims. For example, there is reason to believe that simulations can be designed to foster desired civic outcomes. Studies of how varied simulations influence the development of civic identities and civic skills are needed. Such work provides a way to check the claims of gaming proponents and critics. It can also inform those who do not already have strong opinions about video games, but who are interested in promoting civic goals through video games.

We also found that some types of social experiences around video game play were related to civic engagement, but that others were not. Studying these dynamics with better controls

would allow for more nuanced understandings of these dynamics. In addition, crafting questions that more directly get at the different forms of social experiences would allow for deeper insight into differences between the social dynamics of online and face-to-face video game play and into the differences that lead some online video game play to be associated with civic engagement and other such game play to lack this association. For example, does the social or age diversity of groups playing online influence the likelihood that civically oriented issues will arise? Does the relative anonymity of players influence the kinds of norms that are modeled in these communities?

Finally, studies examining the presence of causal relationships between civic gaming experiences and civic engagement should also examine how and why these experiences might bring about shifts in civic engagement. For example, scholars studying civic education have argued that experiences ranging from simulations to learning about and discussing social problems to opportunities to help others can foster a sense of civic capacity (or agency), commitment to particular issues, and connection to others who hold similar concerns. These capacities, commitments, and connections are the building blocks of a civic identity.⁷⁷ Other related perspectives and questions are worth considering as well. For instance, do certain games allow more agency, imagination, or creativity in game play around civic issues than others? Does this greater sense of agency affect levels of civic engagement? Deepening our understanding about why playing certain video games furthers civic engagement might well help both educators and game designers better maximize the civic potential of some gaming experiences.

Research on the Role Schools Can Play

The focus on intentional efforts discussed above highlights a key question for research and policy: Can and will schools effectively support the delivery of civic gaming experiences?

There is understandable hesitancy on the part of many proponents of digital media to engage with schools. Schools often fail to deliver the kind of active, student-directed learning that the best video games model. Nationally, for example, 90 percent of ninth graders said reading textbooks and doing worksheets was their most common activity in social studies.⁷⁸

The factors that enable and constrain effective use of video games in schools need to be studied. Such studies might chronicle more- and less-effective efforts to confront the challenges reformers face, ranging from aligning game content with academic standards, to technical challenges associated with using computers in classrooms, to ways to help educators appreciate the potential that some video games represent, to costs associated with the hardware and software that games require.⁷⁹

It is also important to study which students are given these opportunities. As noted earlier, students who are white, from families with higher incomes, or more academically able often have access to many more civic learning opportunities in school than do other students. If video gaming in schools follows this pattern, the use of games may exacerbate political inequality. On the other hand, if games are provided to a broad cross section of students, they might help to lessen inequalities in civic education. In this study, we found that students of varying income, race, and age all report similar levels of civic gaming

experiences. To the extent that schools provide such experiences, it would be important to know whether they do so equally as well.

Finally, it is clearly important to study the impact of video games when used in schools. A helpful fact about doing such studies in schools is that students are often randomly assigned to classrooms, which makes it easier to approximate experimental conditions. When undertaking such studies, it will be very important to identify appropriate outcomes and related indicators. Games designed to promote civic skills and commitments may not be well suited to boost math test scores. Unfortunately, the pressure to influence standard academic outcomes often leads educational interventions to be assessed on outcomes that do not align with the intervention's goals.

Research on Civic and Democratic Decision Making

The Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey focused on civic engagement. Clearly, in addition to levels of engagement, democratic societies must be concerned with the knowledge, analysis, and goals that inform those actions. Assessing such efforts might require, for example, gauging teens' critical analysis, attention to accurate information, and consideration of alternative perspectives. Games might well promote these outcomes. For example, games can place people in a variety of roles. In doing so, they may be able to help players consider alternative perspectives. Similarly, games might well be effective ways to foster civic knowledge, strategic thinking, and consideration of differing stances with respect to pressing social issues. Studies

that examine how different games do (or do not) effectively respond to such goals would be valuable.

Research on Other Pathways to Participation

The Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey was designed to assess the degree to which video games promote the kinds of civic learning opportunities that civic educators associate with best practice. Other dynamics associated with playing video games may also relate to civic outcomes. For instance, many have stressed the importance of recruitment into political activities as a main way for youth and adults to become engaged.⁸⁰ The social networks young people develop through gaming (and those they may abandon due to the time demands of gaming) may make recruitment more or less likely. Or it may be that certain forms of video game play make recruitment into some kinds of civic and political life more likely than recruitment into other kinds of civic and political life. Studies assessing such possibilities would be valuable.⁸¹

Research on Video Games and the Development of Democratic (or Anti-Democratic) Values

Some games have been criticized for promoting masculine values and stereotypes of women and persons of color.⁸² It is important to assess such possibilities and also their reverse. Can games designed to challenge problematic stereotypes have their desired effect? Similarly, some games may influence how teens think about social issues such as poverty, war, their environ-

ment, or gang life. Games may also influence players' perspectives on possible responses to varied social problems. Finally, some scholars are considering how video games might influence young people's developing perspectives on democratic citizenship.⁸³ Chad Raphael, Christine Bachen, and colleagues, for example, have put forward a framework that generates hypotheses about how design features (such as the way ethical judgments are incorporated into games) can influence the development of democratic values.⁸⁴ Testing the hypotheses embedded in such frameworks will deepen our understanding of the differing kinds of democratic values video games may promote. Developing a better understanding of how the content and structure of games influence such outcomes is important if we wish to fully tap the civic potential of video games.