
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on
Digital Media and Learning

The Civic Potential of Video Games

Joseph Kahne, Ellen Midaugh,
and Chris Evans



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Series Foreword

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning, published by the MIT Press, present findings from current research on how young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life. The Reports result from research projects funded by the MacArthur Foundation as part of its \$50 million initiative in digital media and learning. They are published openly online (as well as in print) in order to support broad dissemination and to stimulate further research in the field.

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About This Report

This report draws from the 2008 Pew Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, a national survey of youth and their experiences with video games done in partnership with Amanda Lenhart at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. That survey led to the report, “Teens, Video Games, and Civics,” which examines the nature of young people’s video game play as well as the context and mechanics of their play. In addition to examining the relationship between gaming and youth civic engagement, “Teens, Video Games, and Civics” also provides a benchmark for video and online gaming among young people on a national level and the first broad, impartial look at the size and scope of young people’s general gaming habits.

This current report, *The Civic Potential of Video Games*, focuses solely on the civic dimensions of video game play among youth. Although it shares some text and findings with the “Teens, Video Games, and Civics” report, it provides a more detailed discussion of the relevant research on civics and gaming. In addition, this report discusses the policy and research implica-

tions of these findings for those interested in better understanding and promoting civic engagement through video games. The interpretation of data and the discussion of implications reflect only the authors' perspectives. The Pew Internet Project and the MacArthur Foundation are nonpartisan and take no position for or against any technology-related policy proposals, technologies, organizations, or individuals and do not take a position on any of the proposals suggested here.

About the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG)

CERG is a research organization based at Mills College in Oakland, California, that conducts quantitative and qualitative research on youth civic engagement. The group looks at the impact of civic learning opportunities and digital media participation on young people's civic capacities and commitments, as well as civic opportunities and outcomes in public schools. The goal is to develop an evidence base on effective civic education practices and policies. Joseph Kahne is currently the Abbie Valley Professor of Education, Dean of the School of Education at Mills College, and CERG's Director of Research. Ellen Middaugh is Senior Research Associate at CERG. Chris Evans is Senior Program Associate at CERG.
www.civicsurvey.org.

About Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA)

PSRA conducted the survey that is covered in this report. PSRA is an independent research company specializing in social and

policy work. The firm designs, conducts, and analyzes surveys worldwide. Its expertise also includes qualitative research and content analysis. With offices in Princeton, NJ, and Washington, DC, PSRA serves the needs of clients around the nation and the world. The firm can be reached at 911 Commons Way, Princeton, NJ 08540, by telephone at 609-924-9204, or by email at ResearchNJ@PSRA.com.

The Civic Potential of Video Games

The Civic Dimensions of Video Games

In Pew's Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey, we asked 1,102 youth ages 12 to 17 if they had played a video game. Only 39 said no.¹ We found that nearly one-third of all 12- to 17-year-olds report playing video games every day or multiple times each day, and three-fourths report playing at least once a week.

The games youth play are diverse. Indeed, in our survey, we classified 14 different genres of games that youth play. Eighty percent of youth play games from more than five different genres. These genres range from sports games (for example, the *Madden* series), to playing music (*Guitar Hero*), to first-person shooter games (*Halo*), to more civically oriented games (*Civilization*). Some games have violent content, but by no means all. Almost all youth who play games that contain violent content also play games that do not.²

Youth play these games on computers, game consoles, portable gaming devices, and cell phones. They play alone, with others online, with friends in the room, as part of a team or guild, in school, supervised, and unsupervised. In addition, many game-related activities arise around game play (what Ito

et al. refer to as “augmented play”³), including visiting and contributing to Web sites about specific games, participating in chat rooms about the game, and customizing the gaming experience by developing and using “cheats” and “mods.”⁴

In short, video games are now a very significant part of young people’s lives. But in what ways? Although we know that young people play games frequently, the relationship of this activity to adolescent development has not been fully explored.

Over the years, as game design has become more sophisticated and the content more varied, debates over the value of games have surfaced. Media watchdog groups such as the National Institute on Media and the Family warn that video games can lead to social isolation, aggressive behavior, and reinforced gender stereotypes.⁵ Advocates of video games’ potential, on the other hand, call attention to the “tremendous educative power” of games to integrate thinking, social interaction, and technology into the learning experience.⁶ Digital media scholars such as Henry Jenkins also highlight how video games and other forms of digital media can foster “participatory cultures” with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.”⁷

Although public debates often frame video games as either good or bad, research is making it clear that when it comes to the effects of video games, it often depends. Context and content matter.

To date, the main areas of research have considered how video games relate to children’s aggression and to academic learning.⁸ However, digital media scholars suggest that other social outcomes also deserve attention. For example, as games become

more social, some suggest they can be important spheres in which to foster civic development.⁹ Others suggest that games, along with other forms of Internet involvement, may take time away from civic and political engagement.¹⁰ No large-scale national survey, however, has yet examined the civic dimensions of video games. Given the ubiquity of video game play among youth, this is a serious omission. Levels of teen civic engagement are lower than desired, adolescence is a time when the development of civic identity is in full force, and, as noted above, video game play has been described both as a means of fostering civic engagement and as a force that may undermine civic goals. In an effort to bring data to bear on this debate, we draw on data from the Pew Teens, Video Games, and Civics Survey. This nationally representative survey of youth ages 12 to 17 enables us to examine the relation between young people's video game play and their civic and political development.

Notes

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2. Ibid.
3. Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming).
4. Cheats are cheat codes that make changes to the way a video game works. They might give a player new abilities, for example. Mods are modifications to a video game. These might involve new content, characters, or music, for example.
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19. Jenkins, "Confronting the Challenges."

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown, "Why Virtual Worlds Can Matter" (working paper, University of Southern California, Institute for Network Culture, 2007), 15. <http://www.johnseelybrown.com/needvirtualworlds.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2008).

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50. In our analysis of civic gaming experiences, we excluded young people who answered, “does not apply.” This response could be interpreted as meaning “never” having had this experience while playing games, but it could also be interpreted in other ways, so we did not include those responses. To ensure that excluding those young people did not alter our findings, we also ran our analysis using the alternate coding system, recoding “does not apply” answers as “never,” and found a very similar set of relationships. The main difference is that two of our relationships that approached statistical significance, and therefore were not noted, became statistically significant. Specifically, the teens with the most civic game experiences were more likely to volunteer and teens with some civic gaming experiences were more likely to protest compared to teens with the least civic gaming experiences. Our overall conclusions are not affected.

51. Although these relationships are consistent and statistically significant, the overall impact of civic gaming experiences on civic outcomes

does not explain a high percentage of the overall variation in civic and political engagement (this is indicated by the R^2 in the tables in appendix B). This is not surprising as we do not expect that video game play is a prime determinant of civic and political engagement.

52. Steinkuehler and Williams, “Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name.”

53. We considered doing a similar analysis assessing the associations between playing games in the 14 gaming genres and civic gaming experiences. Several factors limit our confidence in such an analysis. For example, the analysis would introduce a large number of new independent variables, these independent variables are often highly correlated, the genres were not designed to group games in relation to the civic learning opportunities they provide, and it would be difficult to know which games within the genres might be responsible for any association that was identified.

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87. In households with more than one 12- to 17-year-old, interviewers asked parents about, and conducted interviews with, a child selected at random.
88. PSRAI's disposition codes and reporting are consistent with the American Association for Public Opinion Research standards.
89. PSRAI assumes that 75 percent of cases that result in a constant disposition of "No answer" or "Busy" are actually not working numbers.
90. Parent education was also measured as a proxy for SES. We ran parallel analyses substituting this measure for income, and found some small differences in model fit and parameter estimates, but not substantial enough differences to choose one measure over the other.