



Can games make your kid a better citizen?

Study: Game experiences can provide hands-on learning opportunities

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Parents of video-gaming children, take heart: Your kid is not destined to become an anti-social hermit who lives at home until he's 35. In fact, a new study shows that all that game time could actually be making him a better citizen.

No, this isn't a study funded by the video-game association. It's from the respectable folks at the Pew Internet & American Life Project. And it's the first, says study co-author Joe Kahne, to track the sorts of things kids do when playing — not just how much time they spend playing. "It's really valuable to focus heavily on the quality of those experiences," he says.

Kahne, a professor at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., worked with Pew to conduct this particular survey, which focused specifically on the relationship between gaming and civic experiences among teens. It was part of a larger, \$50 million initiative by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation aimed at assessing how digital media is affecting how kids learn, play and participate in civic activities.

If high-school social studies are but a distant memory, a quick refresher: Anything that has to do with engaging in public life qualifies as a civic activity. Reading up on current affairs is one way to be civically involved; so is raising money for a walk-a-thon, or showing up at a protest.

So, how can playing "Madden" or "World of Warcraft" influence your teenager to get psyched about the three branches of government? It's not as incongruous as it might sound, says Kahne. Game experiences "can be quite valuable from the standpoint of civic and political engagement."

Americans have been pulling away from civic engagement for decades — Robert Putnam wrote about the phenomenon in his 1995 essay "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." Some academics tie this to increased distractions such as television, the Internet and video games — others, like Putnam, cite our lack of trust in government and the political process. Either way, participating in elections and public discourse has long been considered necessary for a healthy democracy.

Video games can provide hands-on learning opportunities for kids that can be much more meaningful than reading a textbook. For instance, you can play a mayor in "SimCity," and get a close-up look at what it takes to build and maintain a community. Helping a newbie get his sea legs in a game simulates the real-world experience of volunteering. And playing games online can expose kids to people with worldviews that differ from their own — in positive and negative ways.

Many of the of the 1,102 teenagers polled said they'd encountered hostility, racism and sexism while playing online — stuff that can certainly happen offline too, says Kahne. "Just as some playground experiences are enriching and some are unpleasant for young people, one can imagine that that would be true in the game world."

The fact is, video games are ubiquitous among today's generation of kids, for both girls and boys. with girls and boys both. Virtually all of the teenagers polled — 97 percent — report playing games. So it's important, says study co-author and Pew researcher Amanda Lenhart, for us to understand that games are "sitting at the table with all the rest of the media that children and teenagers are being exposed to."

One commonly held stereotype paints teenage gamers as solitary, anti-social basement dwellers that can't socialize their way out of a paper bag. But Lenhart says their research ran counter to this notion. For the vast majority of the kids polled, games are a social experience, where they get to interact with their friends. Some kids play with other people in the room, and some play online. But regardless, teenagers view games as something they do with other people, and not just something they do when they're alone.

It might also surprise you to learn that teenagers aren't just into violent shoot-em-up games. In fact, 74 percent of the teenagers polled reported that racing games were their favorite, followed closely by puzzle games such as "Bejeweled," "Tetris" and "Solitaire." Sports titles such as the "Madden" and "FIFA" series were also cited as favorites.

That's not to say that first-person shooters such as "Halo" or violent-themed action games such as "Grand Theft Auto" aren't sought after — they definitely are. But daily gamers are more likely to play a wider range of game genres, according to the Pew study.

The fact that teens are interested in a diverse swath of game types presents an opportunity for parents — and educators, says Kahne. Most kids report learning about social studies through worksheets and classroom activities. But games provide a "whole new and potentially powerful way" to not only teach kids about civic issues, but get them thinking about them, too, he says.

"If we're careful, we can harness young people's interest in video games, and use them to connect them to a range of valuable experiences."

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