



# THE CIVIC POTENTIAL OF VIDEO GAMES

Researchers at the Mills College Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) have engaged in an extensive research project to address the question of whether video game playing is associated with greater civic participation among youth offline and, if so, which aspects of games contribute to civic participation.

CERG's white paper, *The Civic Potential of Video Games* ([www.civicsurvey.org](http://www.civicsurvey.org)) is the end result of this work. The publication of the paper coincides with the release of *Teens, Video Games, and Civics*, a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and CERG on the results of a national Pew Internet survey of 1,102 youth aged 12-17. Both projects were supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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## MAJOR FINDINGS

### ■ ■ ■ Many teens have gaming experiences that parallel aspects of civic life:

- 76% of youth report helping others while gaming
- 52% of gamers report playing games in which they think about moral and ethical issues
- 44% report playing games in which they learn about a problem in society
- 43% report playing games in which they help make decisions about how a community, city or nation should be run.
- 40% report playing games in which they learn about a social issue

### ■ ■ ■ Having these civic gaming experiences is closely related to other measures of civic engagement. Among teens who have frequent civic gaming experiences:

- 70% go online to get information about politics or current events compared with 55% of those with infrequent civic gaming experiences
- 70% have raised money for charity in the last 12 months compared with 51% of those with infrequent civic gaming experiences
- 69% are committed to civic participation compared with 57% of those with infrequent civic gaming experiences
- 61% say they are interested in politics compared with 41% of those with infrequent civic gaming experiences
- 60% stay informed about current events compared with 49% of those with infrequent civic gaming experiences

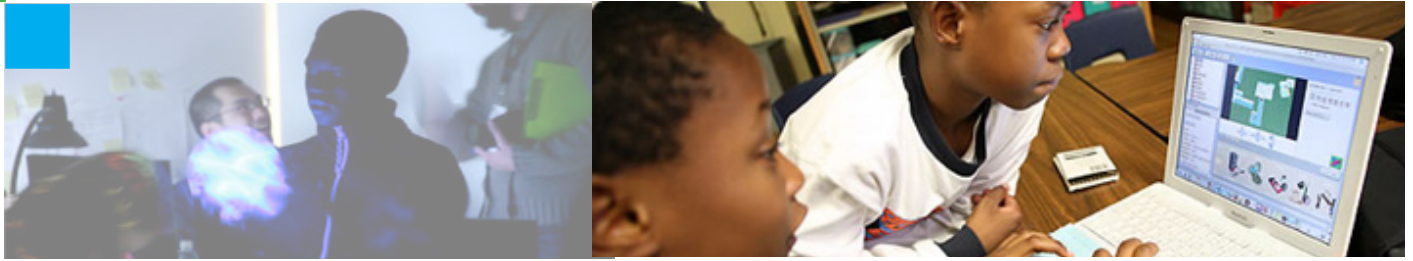
### ■ ■ ■ The overall frequency of game playing is unrelated to civic and social isolation

■ ■ ■ On the survey's eight indicators of civic and political engagement, there is no significant difference between teens who play everyday and those who play less than once a week.

### ■ ■ ■ Civic gaming experiences are evenly distributed by race, ethnicity, and family income

■ ■ ■ This is in contrast to teens' experiences in schools, where white and higher-income students enjoy more opportunities for civic and political engagement.





## IMPLICATIONS

■ ■ ■ Owing to the nature of the survey, the paper does not make causal claims. However, the strong and consistent relationship between some gaming experiences and varied forms of civic engagement suggests the following considerations for parents, educators, and game designers.

■ ■ ■ **Parents and educators should worry less about the quantity of game-playing and more about the experiences teens are having while playing a game.**

■ ■ ■ Given that teens who play games frequently do not exhibit signs of becoming antisocial or less committed civically, and given that video games offer a diverse array of options, parents and educators should consider tapping the potential of this highly engaging medium.

■ ■ ■ **Parents should educate themselves about the range of games available, what constitutes a civic gaming experience, and how to increase children's exposure to this type of gaming experience.**

■ ■ ■ 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.

■ ■ ■ **Educators should exploit the civic possibilities of games in curricula and in the classroom.**

■ ■ ■ One-third of American teens reported playing a computer or console game at school as part of an assignment, in contrast to the 90% of ninth graders who said reading textbooks and doing worksheets was their most common activity in social studies. The range of games played in school is broad and includes content from math to economic simulations to typing skills. Educators should experiment with games as a means of fostering youths' civic capacities, civic commitments, and overall civic engagement.

■ ■ ■ **Game designers should consider how to create games that allow teens to reflect on what their peers are thinking and doing, particularly in ways that promote awareness of values, ethics, and rules.**

■ ■ ■ Many studies suggest that careful reflection will expand the impact of desirable gaming experiences. In addition to efforts by parents and educators to foster reflection, it appears important to facilitate peer-to-peer reflection. The game *Zora*, for example, includes discussion of controversial issues to encourage reflection on and discussion of values, ethics, and rules. Studies assessing the impact of peer-to-peer reflection are needed to examine whether it amplifies the civic impact of playing a game and, if so, which practices are most effective.

## COME JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

In February of 2009, MIT Press will publish the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Learning and Media* (IJLM), a groundbreaking new journal devoted to covering many of the issues in this report and much more. Edited by **Tara McPherson**, **David Buckingham** and **Katie Salen**, IJLM will publish contributions that address the theoretical, textual, historical, and sociological dimensions of media and learning, as well as the practical and political issues at stake. Your contributions are welcome as well! Through an active online network, IJLM encourages participation and comment from everyone. Read the first issue of IJLM for free at [ijlm.net](http://ijlm.net).

**IJLM** The full CERG report will be available for free online from MIT Press in mid-2009. A print version of the report will also be made available for order soon thereafter from MIT Press.