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Study: Video games allow teens to explore social, civic outlets

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12:09 PM CDT, September 16, 2008

Video games may not stunt teenagers' social growth and civic engagement as many parents have long feared, according to a study released Tuesday.

However, researchers did find a correlation between how teens play the games and their social development.

Children who game together—whether in family basements or after-school clubs—are more likely to volunteer, raise money for a charity or participate politically than those who play alone, according to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Washington.

Sixty-four percent of those who play with others in the room said they have raised money for a charitable cause, for example, compared with 55 percent of those who are in a room alone when they play. The engagement did not appear to be affected by how often the teens played or the types of games they chose.

Overall, "there was no evidence that playing games isolates or distracts youth from civic and political life," said Joseph Kahne, a co-author of the report and education professor at Mills College in California.

About two-thirds of teenage gamers said they most often play with others in the room. This counters many stereotypes of gaming as a young boy huddled alone in front of his computer. Nine of every 10 teenagers surveyed said they play some type of video game—a sign of how ubiquitous gaming has become. Despite concerns about sexual and violent content, nine video games sold every second last year, according to the Entertainment Software Association. More than a third of U.S. households now have a gaming console.

Most of the 1,102 teens surveyed with their parents said they play myriad types of games, with



racing, sports and puzzles ranking among the most popular. The nature of the game, in part, determines whether teens play together or alone, according to the study.

In the popular game "Rock Band," four people select different instruments and together must mime their way through a score. Teamwork and a common goal are, by nature, social endeavors.

"The gaming landscape is incredibly broad. . . . That's why this is important because so many kids are doing it. They are doing a lot of it," said Amanda Lenhart, study co-author and Pew senior research specialist.

Waukegan mother Pat Luce has learned to monitor what and how often her children play video games. Luce and her husband implemented a no-gaming rule on school nights and set time limits for weekend use. They check game ratings and screen for inappropriate content. Still, Luce said, she struggles to understand the appeal of it all.

"My son would have a friend over and they'd go downstairs and play video games. I'd say to my husband, 'Is this really social interaction?' . . . To me, if you have a friend over you should do something social," Luce said.

Many teens contend that video games are social. And some learn about civic issues through gaming. About half of teens surveyed said they think about ethical issues while gaming and three-quarters reported helping others online.

Emmi Lambert, 16, took up the popular action game "World of Warcraft" to connect with her Lake Forest High School classmates. She and her friends chat online through the game, much like instant messaging. Lambert said she plays once a week.

"It's kind of fun because a lot of people my age and from my town play," Lambert said. "We go online at the same time and talk."

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