

# PewResearch Internet Project

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## Major new study shatters stereotypes about teens and video games

WASHINGTON, September 16, 2008 – The first national survey of its kind finds that virtually all American teens play computer, console, or cell phone games and that the gaming experience is rich and varied, with a significant amount of social interaction and potential for civic engagement. The survey was conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, an initiative of the Pew Research Center and was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The primary findings in the survey of 1,102 youth ages 12-17 include –

- Game playing is universal, with almost all teens playing games and at least half playing games on a given day.
- 97% of American teens ages 12-17 play some kind of video game.
- 99% of boys say they are gamers and 94% of girls report that they play games.

Game playing experiences are diverse, with the most popular games falling into the racing, puzzle, sports, action and adventure categories.

- A typical teen plays at least five different categories of games and 40% of them play eight or more different game types.
- While some teens play violent video games, those who play violent games generally also play non-violent games.

Game playing is social, with most teens playing games with others at least some of the time.

- 76% of gaming teens play games with others at least some of the time.
- 82% play games alone at least occasionally, though 71% of this group also plays games with others.
- 65% of gaming teens play with others in the same room.

Game playing can incorporate many aspects of civic and political life.

- 76% of youth report helping others while gaming.
- 44% report playing games where they learn about a problem in society.

Game playing sometimes involves exposure to mature content, with almost a third of teens playing games that are listed as appropriate only for people older than they are.

- 32% of youth 12-16 in this sample play games that are listed as appropriate only for people older than they are.
- 32% of gaming teens report that at least one of their favorite games is rated Mature or Adults Only.
- 12-14 year olds are equally as likely to play Mature and Adults Only rated games as their 15-17 year old counterparts.

“The stereotype that gaming is a solitary, violent, anti-social activity just doesn’t hold up. The average teen plays all different kinds of games and generally plays them with friends and family both online and offline,” said Amanda Lenhart, author of a report on the survey and a Senior Research Specialist with the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which conducted the survey. “Gaming is a ubiquitous part of life for both boys and girls. For most teens, gaming runs the spectrum from blow-‘em-up mayhem to building communities; from cute-and-simple to complex; from brief private sessions to hours’ long interactions with masses of others.”

A focus of the survey was the relationship between gaming and civic experiences among teens. The goal was to test concerns that gaming might be prompting teens to withdraw from their communities. It turns out there is clear evidence that gaming is not just an entertaining diversion for many teens; gaming can be tied to civic and political engagement. Indeed, youth have many experiences playing games that mirror aspects of civic and political life, such as thinking about moral and ethical issues and making decisions about city and/or community affairs.

Not only do many teens help others or learn about a problem in society during their game playing, they also encounter other social and civic experiences:

- 52% of gamers report playing games where they think about moral and ethical issues.
- 43% report playing games where they help make decisions about how a community, city or nation should be run.
- 40% report playing games where they learn about a social issue.

Moreover, the survey indicates that youth who have these kinds of civic gaming experiences are more likely to be civically engaged in the offline world. They are more likely than others are to go online to get information about current events, to try to persuade others how to vote in an election, to say they are committed to civic participation, and to raise money for charity.

“We need to focus less on how much time kids spend playing video games and pay more attention to the kinds of experiences they have while playing them,” noted Prof. Joseph Kahne, Director of the Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College, and co-author of the report. “Games that simulate aspects of civic and political

life may well promote civic skills and civic engagement. Youth, parents, teachers, and others who work with youth should know about the wide diversity of video games – so they can take full advantage of games and their civic potential.”

The study also found that these civic gaming experiences occurred equally among all kinds of game players regardless of family income, race, and ethnicity. These data stand in contrast to teens’ experiences in schools and others community situations, where white and higher-income youth typically have more opportunities for civic development.

“Digital media and specifically games are a robust part of the lives of young people,” explains Connie Yowell, Director of Education at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which is funding a \$50 million initiative to help determine how digital media are changing how young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life. “This study offers us a glimpse into the potential of these new tools to foster learning and civic engagement, yet the findings about mature content suggest that parents and other adults need to be involved in young people’s game play, helping to realize the potential benefits while moderating unintended consequences. We see these results as the beginning of an important discussion about the role of digital media in learning, community, and citizenship in the 21st century.”

The Mills College Civic Engagement Research Group has also separately issued a white paper that looks in a more detailed way at the civics findings and provides implications for parents, educators, game designers and others related to the civic potential of video game play.