

Lessons We've Learned from Society

Abstract

There has been considerable media coverage devoted to the suspected but mostly unverified link between violent videogames and violent behavior. Thus, many parents have serious misconceptions about the nature of their children's use of videogames, assuming that it is something that should be minimized. According to the largest and most objective study on this topic, the link between violent videogames and violent behavior is minimal, at best. The study also found that contrary to many assumptions, playing video games can be a valuable social experience for children, helping them to build communication and problem-solving skills. This chapter of "Gaming in

Libraries: Learning Lessons from the Intersections" explores the link between video games, behavior and civic engagement in children.

Violence and Videogames

When adults think about videogames, the image they see usually involves violent ones because many people are preconditioned by the media to assume a causal link between violence and videogames. Stories about cooperative or innocuous videogames aren't controversial, so they don't result in spikes in readership, comments, or ad sales. However, it is important to note that, despite media reports, the percentage of games rated for adults remained at only 15 percent of all games sold for the third straight year in 2007, meaning that 85 percent of games sold were considered appropriate for kids up to age seventeen.¹

However, in 2008, we learned that even this number can be misleading, allowing parents to believe that any game rated E for "everyone" through T for "teen" is an OK match for their child. Not every young adult book is appropriate for every young adult, and not every PG-13 movie is appropriate for every thirteen-year-old. That the same is true of videogames, especially violent videogames, is just one of several important conclusions from a study done by Dr. Lawrence Kutner and Dr. Cheryl K. Olson, cofounders and directors of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media.

In 2004, Drs. Kutner and Olson initiated the largest and most in-depth unbiased study of violent videogames ever conducted in the United States. Kutner and Olson surveyed more than 1,200 middle-school children and more than 500 of their parents over a two-year period, following up with face-to-face interviews with some of the families. The results were published in a 2008 book *Grand*



Figure 1

Grand Theft Childhood?, the website associated with *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games* (www.grandtheftchildhood.com)

*Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games.*² The report did describe some behavior problems linked to videogames, but not in the way most people expected:³

- “Girls who played (any kind of) video games nearly every day . . . were more likely to report bullying other kids, being in physical fights, or getting in trouble with teachers” (12 percent versus 3 percent).
- “For boys, only one problem behavior—hitting or beating up someone—was significantly linked to near-daily gaming play, regardless of M-rated [Mature] game play.”
- “M-gamer girls were three times as likely to say that they’d damaged property just for fun during the previous year than non-M-gamer girls. M-gamer boys were more than twice as likely as non-M-gamer boys to do so.”
- “For almost all of the problem behaviors we measured, the majority—and often the vast majority—of M-gamer kids didn’t do those things.”
- “In our survey of middle school youths, more boys listed a Grand Theft Auto game among their most-played games than any other game or series. Among girls, it came in second. . . . Comments from boys in our focus groups support [Feil’s] view that the open environment is the primary source of the game’s appeal.”
- “One unexpected finding: boys who didn’t regularly play video games (i.e., not at all, or zero days during a typical week) were more likely than even boys who played M-rated games to get into fights.”
- “It’s important to note that most children who play these games are not bullies. Just 10.5% of children who played 15 hours or more per week, and 11.6% of children who played nearly every day, admitted to bullying someone at school more than once or twice in the past couple of months. And of course, not all bullies or victims play violent video games.”
- “We found that nearly twice as many boys as girls (39% versus 20%) preferred games with a story, and girls were more apt than boys to prefer games with no story (25% vs. 14%).”
- “Compared to children who don’t play M-rated games regularly, M-game players were significantly more likely to play games in social settings, with one or more friends in the same room. . . . These are social occasions, particularly suitable for ‘male bonding’ and communicating a masculine identity to your mates.”

However, these problems surfaced for a minority of videogame players, and the study went on to note specific benefits for children playing videogames:

From Grand Theft Childhood

“A child who plays video games for three hours per day and who’s doing well in school, has strong reciprocal friendships, gets along at home and feels good physically and emotionally is probably doing just fine. A child who plays only two hours per week but whose grades have declined, is feeling sad and withdrawn, no longer wants to spend time with friends and is angry at home is not.”

“When we talked to the children, they viewed video game play as largely a social activity, not an isolating one. It did more than provide a topic of conversation; it provided a structure through multiplayer games in which they practiced and improved their verbal communication skills.”

“The first step is to reframe the often-asked question ‘How do I protect my child from violent video games?’ to ‘How do I help my child make the most of time spent playing video games?’”

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), Kindle Locations 3676, 3717, 3855.

- Games allow teens to try on roles and behaviors in a safe environment.
- Games can provide practice in planning and anticipating consequences.
- Games may help teens manage difficult emotions (coping with stress, anger).
- Games may promote involvement in sports/exercise (boys who played realistic sports games spent more hours per week on physical activity).
- Games can improve visual/spatial skills (especially valuable for girls).
- Games provide a focus for socializing (especially for boys).
- Games may provide a source of self-esteem and pride (especially for kids with ADHD and learning disabilities).⁴

Kutner and Olson conclude that parents probably worry too much about the wrong things (violence, gore, and sex), and as a result they miss the more subtle behaviors that can affect those children who truly are more at risk for problems such as depression. The study’s authors are more concerned about parents assessing their children’s developmental ages compared to game ratings than their calendar ages. They encourage parents to look beyond the symptom (“excessive” videogame play) to the cause, if there even is a problem.

Drs. Kutner and Olson clearly outline some of the potential problems with videogame play, but they conclude their book on a positive note:

For most kids and most parents, the bottom-line results of our research can be summed up in a single word: relax. While concerns about the effects of violent video games are understandable, they're basically no different from the unfounded concerns previous generations had about the new media of their day. Remember, we're a remarkably resilient species.⁵

Videogames and Civic Engagement

Since adults often default to associating videogames with violence, few realize the changes in social gaming that have surfaced during the last few years. Drs. Kutner and Olson showed that playing videogames together can provide teenagers with opportunities for bonding and learning anger management, but in 2008, a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, supported by the MacArthur Foundation, showed that there are even more societal advantages in promoting and facilitating social gaming in public spaces.

Released in September 2008, the Pew/Internet study, titled *Teens, Video Games, and Civics* provided “the first nationally representative study of teen video game play and of teen video gaming and civic engagement.”⁶ Some of the study’s findings were not surprising to those who have been paying attention to the growing role of videogames in children’s lives, although even we were probably shocked at just how much the numbers have grown.

When asked, half of all teens reported playing a video game “yesterday.” Those who play daily typically play for an hour or more. Fully 97% of teens ages 12–17 play computer, web, portable, or console games. . . . Fully 99% of boys and 94% of girls play video games.⁷

In addition, the study found that only 24 percent of teens “*only* play games alone, and the remaining three-quarters of teens play games with others at least some of the time.”⁸ In addition, the project found that “the quantity of game play is not strongly or consistently related to most civic outcomes, but that some particular qualities of game play have a strong and consistent positive relationship to a range of civic outcomes.”⁹ The study’s authors defined civic and political outcomes to be such things as “following politics, persuading others how to vote, contributing to charities, volunteering, or staying informed about politics and current events.”¹⁰

While there was no evidence of links between the quantity of videogame play and increased civic engagement, the study did show links between the quality of videogame play and increased civic engagement:

- “The characteristics of game play and the contexts in which teens play games are strongly related to teens’ interest and engagement in civic and political activities.”¹¹
- “Playing games with others in person was related to civic and political outcomes, but playing others online was not.”¹²
- “Teens who take part in social interaction related to the game, such as commenting on websites or contributing to discussion boards, were more engaged civically and politically.”¹³

At the same time the Pew/Internet study was released, the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at Mills College (CA) issued an accompanying paper titled *The Civic Potential of Video Games* that described “the policy and research implications of these findings for those interested in better understanding and promoting civic engagement through video games.”¹⁴ If a library is offering or considering offering videogame play, this is a must-read report because it explains why libraries’ providing public space for game play is even more important than we originally realized:

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.¹⁵

The CERG group argues that videogames in public spaces are one way to nurture democratic values and encourage political engagement:

In his book *Democracy and Education*, noted philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey argued that we must not take for granted the formation of the habits and virtues required for democracy. He believed these must be developed by participating in democratic communities—those places where groups of individuals join together around common interests and where there is “free and full interplay” among those holding differing views. . . .

Simulations of civic and political action, consideration of controversial issues, and participation in groups where members share interests are effective ways, research finds, for schools to encourage civic participation. These elements are common in many video games. . . .

Furthermore, interactions in video games can model Dewey’s conception of democratic community—places where diverse groups of individuals with shared interests join together, where groups must negotiate norms, where novices are mentored by more experienced community members, where teamwork enables all to benefit from the different skills of group members, and where collective problem solving leads to collective intelligence.¹⁶

The paper focuses on school activities and lessons that could use videogames to foster civic engagement, but those activities are necessarily limited by the confines of the school day (45-minute classes), pressures to meet the testing standards of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the lack of resources to integrate videogame play into curricula at a standardized level.

Libraries, on the other hand (particularly public libraries, but also academic and school libraries), don't share those constraints and can therefore offer more engaging, civically oriented experiences around videogame play. In the implications section of the CERG report, the authors give us one of the core reasons libraries should offer social gaming experiences (of all types, not just videogames):

If the networks developed through video game play are more diverse than the networks youth would otherwise have, and if the social interactions that occur involve more than a narrow focus on the games being played, then they could expand young people's access to different perspectives on many civic or political matters and deepen their general concern for members of society they might otherwise not know. Social gaming experiences might also teach civic skills related to being a member of a group or organizing a group. We suspect that when social interactions teach civic skills or concern civic matters, positive civic outcomes are more likely.¹⁷

The library may well be the last safe, noncommercial space left in a community that is open to all, with no barrier to entry for anyone, in which diverse groups of people interact together in ways they don't anywhere else in order to achieve these goals. The CERG paper ends with a recommendation for further research in this area and details roles schools can play to address consistent and equal opportunities for civically engaging game play. However, nowhere in the report does it mention the role libraries can play, a glaring oversight because, as we'll see in the next chapter, some libraries are already offering these types of experiences and seeing the kind of success only hinted at in the Pew/MacArthur and CERG reports.

Lessons Learned

- According to the largest and most objective study done to date, playing violent videogames does not cause violence in most kids. Different kids are affected differently by different games.
- Playing videogames is a social activity for a majority of kids, whether they play with friends online or in person.

- Frequent videogame play does not cause isolation. In fact, playing videogames alone may be a social marker of larger problems in a child's life, and kids who play videogames alone are more likely to be bullied and get into fights.
- A major study from the Pew/Internet Project, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Civic Engagement Research Group found that playing videogames together in the same room can lead to higher levels of civic engagement among teens.

Notes

1. Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," www.theesa.com/facts (accessed April 20, 2009); Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2007 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data*, June 2007, p. 4, www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2007.pdf (accessed May 8, 2009); Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2006 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data*, May 10, 2006, p. 4, www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2006.pdf (accessed May 8, 2009).
2. Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).
3. Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, "Some Key Findings from Our Research," *Grand Theft Childhood?* website, Summary page, www.grandtheftchildhood.com/GTC/Summary.html (accessed March 20, 2009).
4. Ibid.
5. Kutner and Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood*, Kindle Location 4016.
6. Amanda Lenhart et al., *Teens, Video Games, and Civics* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008), i.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., ii.
9. Ibid., v.
10. Ibid., vi.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., vii.
14. Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Chris Evans, *The Civic Potential of Video Games* (Oakland, CA: Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College, 2008), ii.
15. Ibid., 5.
16. Ibid., 6-7.
17. Ibid., 26.