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The Social and Emotional Components of Gaming

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Abstract

This response considers the role of video games in promoting the social and emotional aspects of civic education and engagement. Specifically, it discusses how design choices in iCivics and video games generally may impact students' emotional responses to issues and other people, sense of internal efficacy, and social connectedness.

This article is in response to

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AS A SCHOLAR of civic identity development and youth civic engagement, my research is guided by an assumption that the goal of civic education is not only to teach about civics but to inspire interest in and develop capacity for civic participation (Kahne & Spote, 2008; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Capacity includes knowledge about how government works and impacts various issues but also knowledge of how individuals and groups can exert influence in the public sphere and the skills to be part of that process. This aligns with theories of participatory democracy (Barber, 1984). It is with this lens that I've explored the role of digital media in youth civic and political engagement (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2015) and civic education (Middaugh & Kahne, 2013) and the potential of video games as both a social activity (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2009) and an educational strategy for supporting civic development (Garcia & Middaugh, 2015).

In line with many modern conceptions of civic education (see Gibson & Levine, 2003), my theoretical stance suggests that while knowledge of how government works is important, true

choice to participate requires more than that. It requires experiences that enhance adolescents' understanding of how civic participation is useful and feelings that they have the right and ability to contribute. With this in mind, my response focuses on the social and emotional aspects of civic engagement and how design choices in video games might influence these aspects of civic education.

After reading "The Challenges of Gaming for Democratic Education: The Case of iCivics," I found my thoughts returning to the observation of the designed affective response of the game. These included intense engagement, indicated by players' feelings of frustration and stress—which "likely act as a motivational force

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to learn the game content” (p. 6). In preparing this response, I spent some time playing iCivics games and experienced a similar affective response. While playing *Win the White House*, I was quickly vexed by my computer-simulated opponent’s ability to win over voters, and my play changed. I started the game with little focus, picking randomly among the issues presented to me as choices for my campaign. As I found myself losing, I started paying more attention to the issues I chose between and how they fit with the priorities of the states where I campaigned. My efforts paid off somewhat but not completely. My rival was still winning, but as I experimented, I made up ground.

This experience, described by the original article as well as my own play, reinforces the arguments made by proponents of the educational potential of video games. Such arguments point to the ways in which games can inspire persistence and deep engagement in the face of frustration (McGonigal, 2011). At their best, games provide alternating experiences of frustration and mastery at the right levels to keep players engaged and willing to tackle more challenging tasks. Scholars of games and learning argue that this creates conditions for an experience of Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, with time passing quickly and focus high, allowing for greater learning (Squire, 2003). This certainly was the experience of the players in the original article, and studies of the impact of iCivics on content knowledge acquisition appear to support the idea that this kind of experience creates optimal conditions for learning (Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2013).

However, when I think about the factors that foster ongoing interest in political issues and drive action, the social and emotional landscape becomes more complex. Stress and frustration can certainly be part of civic engagement, and moments of mastery exist when youth learn a new skill (Ballard & Syme, 2016). However, as I discuss, concepts such as hope, social responsibility, caring, empathy, political anger, social connection, and self-efficacy are important to our understanding of youth civic development and civic engagement.

While there is ample evidence that iCivics supports acquisition of content knowledge, we see less evidence of impact on outcomes such as sustained interest in following civic issues or engaging in political discussion (Blevin, LeCompte, & Wells, 2014). Based on the original article and my own brief review of the games, I am left questioning the opportunities provided by the game for players to experience a range of emotional responses, exert agency, and engage in collaboration—the kinds of social-emotional experiences that support civic engagement.

This response is not intended to dismiss the value of iCivics. There is significant evidence of its effectiveness in motivating students to learn civic content, and no single game can serve all purposes. The feature article highlights the benefits of iCivics as part of a multifaceted approach to civic education. My interest here is to expand the discussion to focus on the social and emotional dimensions of civic learning and to consider how design decisions in games might influence the players’ experiences and the potential of games for fostering civic engagement.

The Social and Emotional Side of Civic Engagement

The resurgence in research on youth civic engagement and civic education of the past two decades grows out of concerns about low levels of civic engagement, first noted in the mid-1990s (Putnam, 2000). While knowledge of political processes was a component of this concern, the larger question focused on what actually motivates young people to vote, join civic groups, volunteer, and generally see participation in public life as worthwhile and important. Indeed, the most recent consensus statement from the Civic Mission of Schools (Civic Competencies, n.d.) describes civic competencies as including not just knowledge and intellectual skills but social skills such as building consensus and active listening and dispositions such as tolerance and respect, personal efficacy, and concern with the rights and welfare of others.

Hope, Care, Respect, and Anger in Civic Engagement

Research on factors that predict youth civic engagement has highlighted the importance of attention to the social and emotional aspects of civic engagement and education. For example, studies have suggested that hope and positive expectations for the future predict the likelihood that youth will engage in acts to contribute to the community (Callina, Johnson, Buckingham, & Lerner, 2014). Additional research, focused on “other oriented” attitudes or feelings, has suggested that factors such as caring and respect for others are important motivators of civic engagement (Metzger, Oosterhoff, Palmer, & Ferris, 2014).

Looking at emotion and civic engagement from a different perspective, White (2012) argued the importance of acknowledging anger as a valid emotion in political life, particularly as a counterweight to powerlessness and apathy. In this view, civic education helps distinguish political anger (targeted toward systems and conditions) from personal or social anger (targeted toward individuals and groups) and gives adolescents opportunities to channel political anger into productive understanding and action.

This argument aligns with critical perspectives of civic education, which tend to be concerned with the civic empowerment of marginalized youth. Watts and colleagues have argued that effective civic education for such youth must acknowledge and encourage sociopolitical critique but also provide opportunities to develop internal efficacy and take action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). This perspective is somewhat supported by Diemer and Rapa’s (2016) recent study of a national sample of African American and Hispanic ninth graders, which found a relationship between critical reflection on perceived inequality in the United States and intentions to engage in critical action.¹

1 Diemer and Rapa partially supported and partially complicated Watts and Flanagan’s model with a finding that both critical consciousness and internal efficacy are related to positive civic outcomes for African American and Hispanic adolescents but did not find that efficacy moderates the relationship between critical consciousness and civic action. I refrain here from discussing this finding fully because Diemer and Rapa’s definition of internal efficacy, which focuses on knowledge efficacy, is a fairly narrow definition of internal efficacy.

Internal Efficacy

The importance of internal civic efficacy (an individual's sense of their own capacity for civic engagement) or agency has long been included as a critical aspect of civic engagement, a piece that (along with social connection) helps turn knowledge and commitment into action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Knowing about political issues, feeling they are important to address, and understanding that such issues are regulated by political processes are all important. However, the individual feelings that one is informed and able to act is a different matter altogether. Research suggests that internal efficacy is an important component underlying civic engagement.

Diemer and Rapa (2016) conceptualized internal efficacy as knowing about, understanding, and being able to discuss politics, which they found correlates with a range of civic engagement outcomes such as conventional action, intention to vote, and protest behavior. Using a slightly different definition, Manganeli, Lucidi, and Allivernini (2015) examined the role of citizenship efficacy, a form of internal efficacy conceptualized in terms of civic skills such as feeling able to organize a group of students, argue a point persuasively, or discuss a civic issue. They found this form of efficacy to moderate the relationship between youth experiences with an open classroom climate (in which students are encouraged to express their opinions, raise different points of view, bring up topics, etc.) and their expectations of future engagement.

Social Connection

A third theme that runs throughout research on youth civic engagement is the impact of social trust and social relationships on youth civic engagement. Bobek, Zaff, Lee, and Lerner (2009) argued that social cohesion—"a sense of generalized reciprocity, trust, and bonding to others" (p. 616)—is a critical component alongside civic knowledge, skills, and values necessary for civic engagement. Factor analysis testing the relationship of each variable to an underlying construct of civic engagement supports this statement. Lenzi, Vienno, Pastore, and Santinello's (2013) study of adolescents in Italy added further empirical support for the argument of the importance of social connection. They found social connectedness to be associated with higher levels of civic engagement, mediated by access to adult networks and attachment to community. Finally, Callina et al. (2014) studied the combination of hope and social trust in a longitudinal study of U.S. youth from early to late adolescence and found support for the idea that an at least moderate level of social trust was associated with contributions to community (in contrast to steadily declining social trust from early to late adolescence).

Given the amount of theoretical and empirical attention shown to social and emotional aspects of civic engagement and civic education, I now move my attention to the question of how these qualities of emotional response (hope, anger, caring, respect), internal efficacy, and social connection may be impacted by the design of civic video games. I draw on the feature article and iCivics to frame the discussion but purposefully focus on design features more generally as we think about the future of video games and civic education.

Designed Experiences: Choices in Video Games

The feature article called attention to the importance of teacher mediation to appropriately frame and invite critical thinking as part of gameplay, a point that I fully agree with when using media to convey civic content. There is much that teachers can do when considering iCivics as a component of civic education to help students connect the content they learn through iCivics to civic skills and actions. This is a caution that applies to all kinds of media. For example, in a very different technological era, social studies scholar Levstik (1995) cautioned the need for teacher mediation when using literature in the social studies classroom on the account that the story elements that make literature compelling—such as a strong protagonist—also may cloud critical thinking and consideration of multiple perspectives. As I discuss, the same applies to video gameplay.

However, video games also require a focus on design choices. In what follows, I draw on literature on educational uses of video games, both in civic education and in other fields such as health education, to discuss how design choices may influence the social and emotional experiences of the player and, in turn, the civic learning opportunities.

Who Is the Protagonist?

One critical aspect for educational video games is the use of story to engage the player, particularly, as research in health-related educational video games suggests, when the goal is to inspire behavior changes (Baranowski, T., Buday, Thompson, & Baranowski, J., 2008). Baranowski and colleagues defined *story* as including a series of events, a protagonist, and a conflict to be resolved in a specific period of time. In health education, the protagonist models the changes in attitude and behavior in the course of resolving conflicts, for example, combatting health threats by eating more fruits and vegetables.

In the games described in the feature article, the protagonist in every case is a person with some form of economic or political power: a managing partner in a law firm, a president, an immigration officer, an official with control of the federal budget. It is not surprising that the observations of empathy as the participants played were directed toward those making the tough decisions, as those are the game protagonists.

On one hand, this has positive potential. Games can provide opportunities for identity exploration, giving players an opportunity to imagine themselves in roles as people with influence, demystifying such roles. Gaining empathy for political figures as people making tough decisions may humanize the political system.

On the other hand, if the only protagonists in a game are the politically and economically powerful, there are limitations to the social and emotional experience. If our hope is that young people begin to see themselves as people who are important to and capable of defining and addressing issues of public concern, it is problematic if every protagonist is far removed from their daily experiences. In reviewing the range of iCivics games, I found two games that take the perspective of the average citizen, but more often, the protagonist is a person in power. This raises interesting questions about the impact of the protagonist on feelings of internal efficacy.

For example, do players experience a heightened sense of internal efficacy when they play games in which the protagonist is an individual citizen and winning requires their mastery of certain knowledge and skills that individual citizens use to exert influence?

Additionally, games can be played from the point of view of different protagonists. For example, the game could be designed to allow players to choose a different protagonist every time—the immigration officer, the immigrant, an employer or family member trying to figure out how to help someone immigrate legally or gain a path to citizenship. Would having the option to vary the protagonist in different rounds of play evoke a more complicated set of emotional responses? Might exposure to different kinds of protagonists give students a sense of common humanity across different viewpoints and foster social trust? Would having the opportunity to play games from different protagonist perspectives invite students to express opinions and debate issues (qualities of an open classroom climate) in ways that foster agency and efficacy?

Political Reality vs. Democratic Possibility

Another area of design highlighted in Baranowski et al.'s (2008) review was that of fantasy, which they defined as “active use of imagination” (p. 78). It is commonly understood that adolescence is an important developmental time for fostering civic engagement. This is in part because of adolescents’ growing cognitive capacities to think abstractly and hypothetically, to question social arrangements, and to consider their role in either maintaining or changing such arrangements (Erikson, 1968; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Empirical evidence documenting the increased stability of both attitudes toward politics and willingness to engage in political activity from early (seventh grade) to late (eleventh grade) adolescence supports the theoretical claims of adolescence as a time of exploration of civic identity and an important time to support such exploration (Eckstein, Noack, Gniewosz, 2012).

Alongside these developments in social cognition related to politics, morals, and civic life, a tendency to engage in fantasy also increases throughout adolescence (Baranowski et al., 2008). This is a time for adolescents to play with the relationship between civic and political life as it is and civic and political life as they believe it ought to be.

Video games provide low-risk opportunities to play with what-if scenarios. For example, in the feature article, players got to experiment with what would happen if they funded all of the public programs fully, finding out that in spite of prosocial intentions, this act resulted in harmful outcomes. This gives the player a chance to play around with different courses of action within the constraints of the existing system.

However, this is a pretty constrained view of fantasy. Players are able to experiment with different outcomes within a set of existing laws. What happens if the laws are changed? Might games that provide options to experiment with changing the constraints of current arrangements and imagine different futures might be productive as well? This seems particularly important for young people who are living in circumstances where they do not feel well

served by the current government and laws. For example, I expect that learning the details of immigration law as a child separated from family by deportation provides little in the way of hope or agency. While there are limits to what a game can do, playing a game in which there are options to explore variations in outcomes under different immigration policies (which do change as a result of political activism) at least acknowledges different experiences and opens up thinking about possibilities.

Regardless of position in society, teenagers are developmentally inclined to raise questions about why certain rules are in place and whether they must be there (Turiel, 2002). As discussed earlier, anger at perceived injustices in the system is one of many natural responses, and many argue for the importance of acknowledging and engaging adolescents’ critiques of society in civic education. Part of channeling anger into action involves some sense of hope that something can be different. It is interesting to see how the angry language in immigration nation, (“Get rid of this jerk!”) is targeted toward an individual. Opportunities to channel words—“That’s not fair!” or “People are getting hurt!”—into actions to change policy provide an option to play with the system, not just within the system.

When Winning Equals Helping

Another design question within video games is how the goals of the game influence the emotional response and experience of the game. Games vary in whether winning depends on the number of enemies shot, puzzles solved, or people helped. Experimental studies of these variations in the designed goals of gameplay suggest that games with prosocial goals—where winning requires guiding characters to safety—increase the likelihood that players will respond empathetically to the misfortune of others (Greitemeyer, Ossual, & Brauer, 2010) or display helping behaviors (Rosenberg, Baughman, & Bailenson, 2013) following game play. Even more interesting is Greitemeyer, Ossual, and Brauer’s (2010) finding that playing such games reduces *schadenfreude* (satisfaction that a person got the negative outcome they deserve), suggesting an impact on empathy for characters that the player does not find relatable.

These studies lead to my third design question, which has to do with relationship between winning and helping in games and the emotions evoked during play. Many iCivics games have some element in which success requires helping the most people possible or helping the community. However, some games, like *Immigration Nation*, take a more legalistic stance where winning requires helping those who obey the laws and punishing those who don’t. In light of Greitemeyer, Ossual, and Brauer’s (2010) finding related to *schadenfreude*, I find myself questioning how this type of game impacts students’ emotional responses to stories of undocumented immigrants being deported. I am also interested in whether the games in which the goal is to win an argument or an election make one more or less interested in others’ viewpoints.

The iCivics games cover a good deal of civic content and go in-depth on civic processes. As they do this, the games necessarily vary in whether the goals focus on helping others, defeating an opponent, winning an argument, et cetera. It would be interesting

to investigate how different modes of game play influence players' sense of caring, respect, and interest in helping others.

Solo Play vs. Social Play

The final design feature raised here has to do with whether games are designed to be played socially or alone. The previous section focused on how winning is conceptualized in the narrative of the game and whether the goal of the game protagonist is to help others. The other way in which helping often comes into gameplay is when games are networked and collaborative. Youniss and Yates's (1997) influential book theorizing the qualities of civic education that promote civic engagement called attention to the social element of civic education—opportunities to work collaboratively with others. Such opportunities are believed to build skills needed for civic engagement (organizing others, discussing, and debating, etc.) but also to build social trust.

Qualitative studies of networked gameplay have suggested that games can provide similar opportunities. Wohn, Lampe, Wash, Ellison, and Vitak's (2011) interviews with players of Facebook games (like Mafia Wars and Farmville) documented how such games provide opportunities to strengthen ties with friends (giving opportunities to help each other out and having a common experience to discuss) and encourage players to broaden their social networks, as having more players supports the ability to win the game. These experiences align with the bridging and bonding social capital, which Putnam (2000) argued is fostered by community activities and supports democratic engagement. Other studies of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) have reinforced this argument, documenting the ways in which these games function as communities by connecting players who begin to rely on each other for support (Steinkuhler & Williams, 2006) and require players to learn social skills such as cooperating with others to accomplish a task and managing groups (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005).

In addition to these qualitative studies of players' experiences, my colleagues and I found in a quantitative study of teens' video game play, that playing games socially is significantly associated with civic outcomes (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2009). While the studies to date do not establish causal direction, there is enough evidence to suggest that attention to the social interactions around game play is warranted.

So much of civic life requires social interaction: working with others to accomplish goals, identifying and resolving conflicts, explaining a point of view to others. All of the iCivics games featured on the website are designed for an individual player, though it appears that some games can be modified within a classroom setting to be social or collaborative. It would be interesting to see if multiplayer options—where students either play against each other and take turns on different sites, or play collaboratively (for example, working together as multiple parts of a team to help address the needs of a city or campaign)—result in different outcomes than single-player models. As commercial games are increasingly networked and social, the question of how social play in educational games may impact civic outcomes is intriguing.

Discussion

Video games have been evolving rapidly, opening up possibilities for education. iCivics, as the feature article highlighted, provides some important affordances for civic education. Designing a game that aligns well with classroom curriculum, provides educational content, and creates motivation and engagement among players is no small feat. All too often the education outweighs the entertainment or vice versa, or they combine in ways such that neither are really present.

Teacher mediation will always be an important aspect of using games in education. However, design can help, and I argue here that for the purpose of civic education, the impact of design on the social and emotional aspects of civic education needs to be considered alongside the impact on knowledge and reasoning.

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