

Survey: Nearly every kid a video gamer

By MARTHA IRVINE – 9/16/08



In this Jan. 9, 2008 file photo, Judy Mellett of Toronto poses while playing a video game through Myvu's personal media viewer at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. A new national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that while they don't necessarily play the same thing, nearly all U.S. youth - girls included - play video games of one kind or another. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, file)

CHICAGO (AP) — Katherine Graden doesn't really like shoot-'em-up video games. She prefers games on her Wii system that test her fitness and agility — the ones her guy friends tease are her "sissy games."

"I'm like, 'Fine! Go play your violent games. I'll stick with mine,'" the high school freshman from Chicago says, chuckling.

It's a common scenario, according to a new national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project that illustrates just how ingrained games have become in youth culture.

The survey found that while young Americans don't necessarily play the same thing, nearly all of them — girls included — play video games of one kind or another.

And they don't just play by themselves. Nearly two-thirds play video games to socialize face-to-face with friends and family, while just over a quarter said they play with Internet friends.

"It shows that gamers are social people," says Amanda Lenhart, a senior researcher at Pew who led the report on the survey. "They communicate just as much. They spend time face-to-face, just as much as other kids. They e-mail and text."

The survey, released Tuesday, combined the telephone responses from a nationally representative sample of 1,102 young people, ages 12 to 17, and their parents. Performed from November 2007 through February of this year, and partly funded by the MacArthur Foundation, it had a margin of error of three percentage points.

Among other things, the survey found that:

_ Ninety-seven percent of young respondents play video games. That's 99 percent of boys and 94 percent of girls, with little difference in the percentages among various racial and ethnic groups and incomes. In fact, 7 percent of those surveyed said they didn't have a computer at home, but did have a game console, such as Sony Corp.'s PlayStation, Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox or Nintendo Co.'s Wii.

_ They play often. When surveyed, half of the respondents said they had played a video game the previous day.

_ Their games of choice are as diverse as their tastes in music or TV. Eighty percent of respondents play five or more different game genres, with racing, puzzles, sports and action the most common. Favorites were "Guitar Hero," "Halo 3," "Madden NFL," solitaire and "Dance Dance Revolution."

_ Young people are routinely able to get their hands on games that are rated "M" (for mature) or "AO" (adults only). Three-quarters of parents who were surveyed said they "always" or "sometimes" check the ratings on their kids' games. And yet, half of boys who were questioned listed a game with an "M" or "AO" rating as one of their favorites, compared with 14 percent of girls.

Regardless, Pew researchers said they want to steer clear of depicting video games as "good" or "bad," says Joseph Kahne, a study co-author and dean of the education school at Mills College in California.

He noted, for instance, that even games with violent content, such as "Halo," provided "more than average opportunities for players to help one another."

Kahne also looked at games' effect on civic engagement, anything from political involvement to raising money for charity. He found that those who spent the most time playing video games weren't any less likely to be involved in their communities.

The survey did, however, find that those who played games in face-to-face social settings were more likely to say they were committed to civic participation.

Mimi Ito, an anthropologist who studies the use of new media, said more research is needed to explain this phenomenon. But she speculates the ties that gamers make with "real-life local friends" stimulate civic engagement.

"Gaming is the reason to get together — but they're probably talking about other things," says Ito, who's based at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center of Communication.

For this and other reasons, Ito cautioned parents against negative stereotypes about video games.

How young people play a game, she says, is as important as what they play.

To that end, Jesse Schell, a professor of entertainment technology at Carnegie Mellon University, hoped the report would encourage parents to learn more about the video games their children play.

"If more parents would take the time to play the same things their children are playing — or even better, play with them — it would benefit both parents and children," says Schell, who teaches video game design.

About a third of parents who were surveyed said they play video games with their children some or all of the time. Most of those parents are younger than 40, part of a generation that grew up playing video games themselves.

Kimberly Coleman, a 35-year-old mom and blogger in New York City, was a fan of "Pac-Man" and "Donkey Kong" as a kid. She now plays video games with her 4-year-old son, but only those with physical activity, such as Wii Sports, or an educational component.

"Growing up with video games made me more hesitant to have a gaming system in our home," says Coleman, who doesn't want her kids to become "couch potatoes."

That's why Graden, back in Chicago, likes her Wii Fit. She's also started playing "Guitar Hero" with her buddies, though, though she's a little miffed it has only a few girl characters. "They dress, like, really sleazy," she says. "It's sort of weird."

Graden also plays the Wii with her mom, but only after she hits the books and practices her French horn.

"For me," she says, "it's always schoolwork first."

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