

Opinion

Let's ditch the tired tropes about video games – and research their impact properly

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Over the past few years, it feels as if there has been a subtle shift in the way that we view video games. That classic trope of games being a socially isolating experience, primarily within the purview of angry, pallid teenage boys, seems increasingly tired and outdated - because it is. Video games are no longer a niche, nerdy pastime. Much the opposite: they are one of, or perhaps *the* defining entertainment medium of the 21st century. **One estimate** puts the total number of people across the globe who play video games at 3.09 billion, with **data from the US** suggesting that two-thirds of American adults play them, with a fairly even split between men and women.

But, even though we've moved past the most strongly negative characterisations of video games and become more accustomed to them, they're still viewed with a certain level of suspicion. And we're still presented with a seemingly endless cycle of scare stories in the news about their detrimental effects. I'm a firm believer in the huge potential of video games as a force for good in our lives, and I've **written before** about the benefits they can have - their ability to connect us and to allow us to explore and understand our emotions and attitudes. Nevertheless, the broad-level discussion about their impact seems to be at an impasse: games are becoming ever more popular, while commenters are often stuck in a simplistic back and forth about whether they are good or bad for us.

Part of the reason for this is that despite their ubiquity, our scientific understanding of what video games can do for us remains relatively - and surprisingly - sparse. **Much like the public conversation, the academic study of gaming has often focused on the negative aspects of play, or has been a reaction to those societal concerns.** This has created problems for a few reasons. First, historically a lot of the research in this area has been methodologically quite poor. Take

research on the link between violent games and aggression: for decades, studies in this area were hampered by unhelpful methods of [measuring aggression](#), such as assuming that the chance to “punish” a gaming opponent with a loud noise tells us something about real-world violence. Compounding the problem, the presence of deeply entrenched and [ideological viewpoints](#) has made adversarial collaborations – that is, getting researchers with differing beliefs to work together to figure out what the real effect is in a way that everyone is happy with – untenable.

This has meant that despite a large body of research being conducted on the topic, it has taken researchers a long time to get to a point where they could actually give us any meaningful insight. It is only recently, with the advent of [more robust studies](#) that adhere to open science principles – preregistering study protocols prior to data collection, and making the ensuing data available for everyone to see and discuss – that we’ve largely been able to put that topic to rest. The [best evidence we have](#) suggests that there are no substantive or long-term associations between violent video-game content and aggressive behaviours.

Second, the relentless focus on negative aspects of play has sucked the oxygen out of the room for researchers asking much more basic and more interesting questions about video games. We still don’t have a clear, theoretically driven understanding of why people enjoy playing them in the first place, or where the true benefits and risks lie. Put together, it has meant that psychological scientists have had limited success in trying to move the public debate about games forward and in driving meaningful government policy changes that would maximise the benefits and minimise the potential harms of digital play.

One of the reasons the research is hard to do well is that it’s extremely difficult to design experimental studies that appropriately replicate real-life gaming situations. As a [2019 government report noted](#), “both policymaking and potential industry interventions are being hindered by a lack of robust evidence, which in part stems from companies’ unwillingness to share data about patterns of play.” Put simply, doing this sort of research is surprisingly non-trivial, and it doesn’t help matters that games companies are, by and large, reluctant to allow researchers access to their products or data.

Very often, psychologists have to resort to questionnaire-based surveys that ask players to self-report things, such as the amount of time they spend playing video games, how much they spend on or in them, or how they feel. We know from recent research, however, that such measures aren’t particularly accurate, especially when it comes to time spent playing; surprisingly, people [tend to overestimate](#) this. If we want to make meaningful inroads into understanding the effects of video games, we need access to objective, real-world industry data, and while there have been some admirable efforts to obtain this, for the most part it’s still outside the reach of most researchers.

This is why the government’s publication of a new [video games research framework](#) earlier this year is so important. Identifying a need for a stronger research evidence base, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has engaged extensively with researchers, games industry representatives and other agencies to develop a set of best-practice guidelines to push for more

high-quality research in the future. In a way, it's a blueprint for thinking about how we could leverage the right sort of data to answer more meaningful and useful questions about how video games affect us. That starts with the basics of how we go about categorising different forms of game play in the first place.

The framework also lists a whole raft of priority research questions. How, for instance, do new and emerging video-game technologies affect the subjective experiences of players? What might this look like in terms of influencing our ability to relate to other people in a more compassionate way?

We don't have the answers to these sorts of questions yet, but my hope is that the framework will give us the tools we need to approach them in a rational and sensible manner. If we truly care about understanding the impact - positive and negative - that video games can have on us, now is the time to start taking them with the seriousness that they deserve.

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