CAN GAMING TEACH YOU IMPORTANT LIFE SKILLS?

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For decades, gaming has become an increasingly popular pastime. It's now estimated that more than three million people around the world play videogames. However, gaming often comes with a negative image, particularly around games featuring violence, and people spending so long gaming that their health and wellbeing suffer. However, that's not the whole story. In recent years, there have been several studies that look at the benefits of gaming and the skills that it can teach young people. We consider the issues.

THE HISTORY OF GAMING

The first, very simple videogames were created in the 1950s, but it was in the 1970s that they became popular in arcades, where people could go to play a variety of games. The popularity of games like *Pong* and *Space Invaders* led to the development of home gaming consoles, which allowed people to play their favourite games at home.

The *Space Invaders* arcade game

Visitors to Gamescom in the then West Germany play *Pong*, the videogame that was first released in 1972

The classic videogame *Space Invaders*, which was first released in 1978

The industry faced a setback in the 1980s, as too many low-quality games had gone on sale. However, in the mid 1980s, Nintendo introduced the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System), with really popular games like *Super Mario Brothers* and *The Legend of Zelda*. By 1989, **handheld consoles** like the Nintendo Game Boy, Atari Lynx and Sega Game Gear were on the market. Lots of games had also been specially developed for personal computers.

During the 1990s and 2000s, videogames saw big developments in the use of 3D graphics, story-telling and multiplayer gaming. Popular devices included Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox. Smartphones also made gaming available to many more people, who could now carry lots of games around in their back pocket!

Nowadays, many games have progressed to include technology like **virtual reality** (VR) and **augmented reality** (AR), so gamers become totally engaged with the world created by the game. Players are now also able to connect with friends and other gamers online around the world.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Throughout the years, gaming has had a lot of negative attention in the media. A concern that is often discussed is that many videogames feature violence, with everything from war scenarios to fighting mythical creatures. Brad Bushman, a professor of communication and psychology, says that violent games "teach kids that **aggression** is a successful way to solve conflicts and get what you want".

However, many studies have looked into the impact of playing violent videogames and whether it can make people, particularly young people, behave violently; and the findings have been mixed. A study from 2018 suggested that young gamers were more likely to be aggressive and to get into trouble, however, a more recent study from 2020 found no major evidence that violent videogames cause violent or aggressive behaviour. It's an area that continues to be studied; meanwhile, videogames in the UK have ratings to help parents

and carers decide which games are appropriate for their children, and also to ensure that young people can't buy games that contain unsuitable content. For example, *Fortnite* has an age rating of 12+ in the UK.

There are also concerns about online safety, and gamers are advised to talk to a trusted adult about the best way to avoid potential dangers, such as cyberbullying, or strangers pretending to be someone they are not.

Another issue is that gaming can be **addictive**. This is because videogames often involve rewards and achievements, which trigger the brain to release a feel-good chemical called **dopamine**, and this makes gamers want to keep playing. When people play videogames excessively it can mean that their health suffers, because they aren't eating properly, drinking enough water or getting enough sleep. Sitting down for long periods of time and not moving enough can also lead to weight gain, headaches and neck and back problems. Gaming can also cause eye strain and **repetitive strain injury** (RSI) to the hands and wrists. However, there are now games like *Just Dance* or *Pokémon Go!*

that encourage people to get active or out and about, so it wouldn't be fair to say that all types of gaming have the same risks.

Gaming too much can also mean that young people don't have enough time for other things in their lives, like hobbies and schoolwork, and relationships with friends and family can suffer. This can lead to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. In 2019, the **World Health Organisation** (WHO) recognised 'gaming disorder' as a mental health condition that affects 8.5% of young gamers under the age of 18. It is also much more likely to affect boys than girls.

It's important to note that most of these negatives are associated with excessive gaming, rather than gaming in **moderation**. Some people would argue that in any case, it's better for young people to learn life skills from traditional activities like reading, doing puzzles or playing sports; however, others point out that gaming also has lots of benefits.

Age ratings on videogames

Is it better to learn life skills from traditional activities like this?

THE SKILLS INVOLVED IN GAMING

In recent years, researchers have looked at some of the benefits of gaming and the skills it can help young people to develop. Here are some of the areas that have been highlighted:

■ Teamwork

Lots of videogames require teamwork with other players to achieve a goal or mission. Developing teamwork skills can be really beneficial in lots of different jobs. In fact, a study by Brigham Young University found that in the workplace, teams that started playing videogames together produced 20% more work than they had before!

■ Decision-making and problem-solving

In a study by Georgia State University, the brains of gamers and non-gamers were scanned while they performed tasks. The people who played videogames were found to make faster and more accurate decisions. Another study found that gamers were more likely to be able to make quick decisions and keep track of lots of things at once. Gamers also often have to solve puzzles and figure out solutions, which develops problem-solving skills. Professor James Paul Gee says: "Gamers co-author the games they play by the choices they make and how they choose to solve problems, since what they do can affect the course and sometimes the outcome of the game."

■ Hand-eye coordination

Videogames often require players to have fast **reflexes**, for example, if they involve tracking fast-moving objects and reacting quickly. This can improve hand-eye coordination, which is the way your hands and eyesight work together. In fact, surgeons who play videogames are proved to be more accurate at performing surgery!

■ Communication and literacy

A survey by the **National Literacy Trust** found that gaming improves young people's communication skills. A massive 76% of gamers said they talk to

Which videogames do you think they're discussing?

their friends about videogames, which helps them to feel connected to people in real life as well as online, and boosts their mental health. The same study found that 79% of gamers read about gaming, so their literacy is getting a boost, too!

■ Managing money

Lots of videogames have their own form of money, such as V-bucks in *Fortnite*, Robux in *Roblox* and Bells in *Animal Crossing*. In some games, this is bought with real money and in others it's earned inside the game. There have been news stories about young people who have accidentally spent a lot money on videogames, so gamers need to be aware of how much things cost and how they spend their real and online money, which can help to develop important financial skills.

Mojang

■ Coding and development

In games like *Minecraft* (above), gamers can modify the game itself through coding. In a world where technology is progressing so quickly, gaming development and design skills could be a real asset

in a future career. Professor Gee says: "Videogames provide an easy lead-in to **computer literacy**. They can get you thinking like a videogame designer and can even lead to designing, since many games come with software to modify the game or redesign it."

■ Managing stress

Although gaming in excess isn't good for mental health, in moderation it can be an enjoyable way to escape from day-to-day worries, which can help people to relax and cope with stress.

■ Developing imagination and creativity

Videogames can introduce young people to all sorts of imaginary worlds, from dragons and wizards to adventures in outer space, which can really inspire their imagination. Games where players design new elements put their creativity to the test, too.

■ Learning about the real world

There are videogames that can develop players' knowledge by exploring everything from the underwater world to ancient history. In fact, *First News* recently reported that environmental campaign organisation Greenpeace Brazil had launched a *Minecraft* game to raise awareness about the importance of saving the rainforest.

Ninja Block Studios/Greenpeace

■ Encouraging empathy

In many videogames, players become other characters and see things through someone else's eyes. This can help gamers to develop a greater understanding of other people's situations and experiences and lead to more **empathy** in the real world.
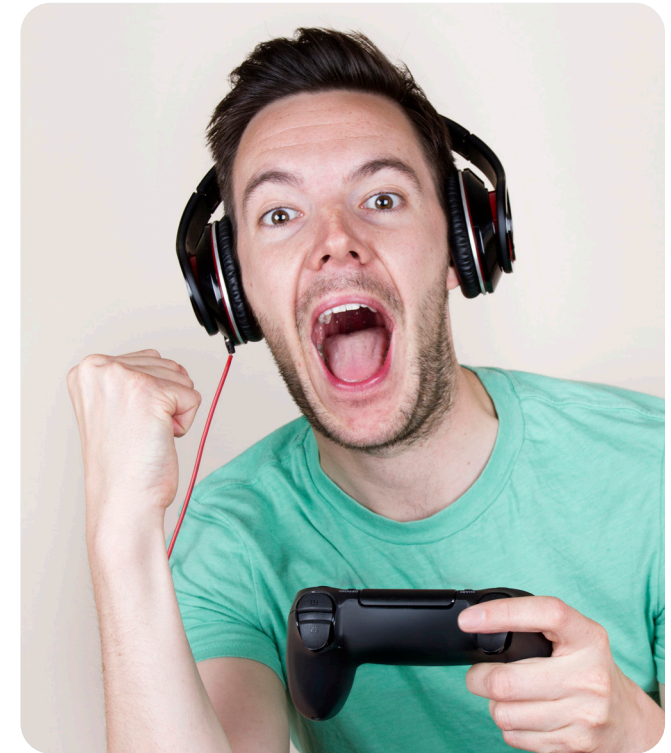
■ Learning from failure

Failing a level and trying again is a big part of many videogames. Learning from failure builds **resilience**, which is a valuable life skill that can help you to tackle all sorts of challenges. The pride you feel when you stick with something and it pays off is good for your confidence, too.

So, there is no doubt that there can be a lot of benefits to playing computer games, but it very much depends on the games each person is playing, how much time they spend gaming and how it affects them individually. Do you think the benefits outweigh the potential downsides?

OPINIONS

Game designer and author Jane McGonigal says: "If you are a gamer, it's time to get over any regret you might feel about spending so much time playing games. You have not been wasting your time. You have been building up a wealth of virtual experience that… can teach you about your true self: what your core strengths are, what really motivates you, and what make you happiest."

Counsellor Edward Luker is concerned about the negative effects of gaming, saying: "Excessive videogame use can affect a person's mental, social and physical health. This can include difficulties with paying attention, managing emotions, controlling impulses, following directions and tolerating frustration. Also, kids who rely on screens to interact with others typically feel lonelier than kids who interact in person."

Handheld console – a portable electronic device with a built-in screen, controls and speakers

virtual reality (VR) – an environment created by a computer that someone can interact with as if it were real

augmented reality (AR) – technology that combines computer generated images on a screen with the real object or scene someone is looking at

aggression – angry, threatening or violent behaviour

addictive – something that someone is unable to stop doing

dopamine – a chemical in the brain that contributes to feelings of happiness and satisfaction

repetitive strain injury (RSI) – a painful condition where muscles, tendons or nerves are damaged due to constantly repeated movements in a part of the body

World Health Organization (WHO) – the part of the United Nations that's responsible for promoting international health and wellbeing

In moderation – in a way that's reasonable and not excessive or extreme

reflexes – the ability to react quickly with your body when something unexpected happens

National Literacy Trust – a UK charity that works with schools and communities to promote literacy (reading and writing) skills

computer literacy – the ability to use computers and modern technology

empathy – the ability to imagine and understand someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like in their situation

resilience – the ability to recover quickly from difficulties

YES, GAMING CAN TEACH YOU IMPORTANT LIFE SKILLS...

1. The bad reputation gaming has had is very unfair. Studies have shown that playing videogames can help young people to develop all sorts of skills, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication and managing money, which could be really helpful in a future career. Lots of people find gaming fun, too!

2. Gaming can not only teach young people about the real world, but also create fantasy worlds that develop imagination and creative thinking. Plus, it allows people to see things from other points of view, which leads to a world with more empathy and understanding.

3. Most people don't become addicted to gaming. In fact, gaming can help young people to cope with stress and to keep trying until they find a way to succeed. Both of these will help to build resilience and the ability to cope with life's challenges.

NO, GAMING CAN'T TEACH YOU IMPORTANT LIFE SKILLS...

1. Learning life skills doesn't need to involve gaming, young people can learn important life skills from activities like reading, completing puzzles or playing sports.

2. There are too many videogames that feature violence, which teaches kids that being aggressive is the way to get what they want.

3. The World Health Organization has recognised gaming disorder as a condition. When young people become addicted to gaming, it can have a really negative effect on their health and wellbeing.

QUESTIONS

Do you enjoy playing videogames? If so, which are your favourites?

What have you learned, at school or at home, about staying safe online?

If videogames didn't exist, how else could these skills be developed?

Do you think any of these skills would help you in your future career?

If you were designing a videogame based on **real-life**, what would it be about?

When you start playing a videogame, do you find it difficult to stop?

Are you surprised by the number of skills that gaming can help to develop?

Which of these skills do you think is the most valuable, and why?

Would you like to play more or less videogames?

If you were designing a videogame based on **fantasy**, what would it be about?