

Game on! New study says video games could be good for you

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Noah Bakshis, 15, plays a computer video game titled "Dust: An Elysian Tail" at his home in Plainfield, Illinois. John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune/TNS

CHICAGO — Imagine a hardcore video game fan, and you probably would not picture Roman Rivera.

He grew up mesmerized by games from "Pokemon" to "Call of Duty," and dodged the limits his parents put on his gaming by playing his Game Boy after bedtime. Now that he is 21, he spends up to four hours a day battling enemies in "Dota 2."

Yet he was an honor student at Downers Grove North High School outside of Chicago, and today he is studying at the University of Chicago. This did not come in spite of gaming, but because of it, Rivera said.

Rivera said video games have broadened his interests and made his mind more agile. "Without a doubt they have benefited me," he said.

Rivera may be right.

Research Says Game On!

A new wave of research has found surprising advantages in an activity that many call a waste of time, if not an outright menace. Scientists have recently linked gaming with increased brain power, making better moral decisions and even physical fitness.

"It seems to have really interesting positive effects," said Daphne Bavelier. She is a neuroscientist who researches video games at the University of Rochester in New York. She said scientists are trying to find out what parts of gaming could be used to make society better.

Researchers have done thousands of studies on gaming since the 1980s. Most of them found that gaming is clearly bad for kids. Video games were linked to an increased risk of epileptic seizures, dangerously faster heart rates and violence.

With a new generation of scientists more familiar with technology, different results often appear in studies, said Christopher Ferguson, a professor at Stetson University in Florida. "And that's what is happening with gaming."

Ferguson has found that violent video games do not make kids more violent. One project actually concluded that some children who play violent games are less likely to be bullies.

He speculated that kids use video games to relieve strong feelings. It could also be that they are busy playing games, "so they don't have time to bully other kids," he said.

Bad-Guy Benefits

Another take on video-game violence came from University of Buffalo professor Matthew Grizzard.

He found that kids who played the bad guy in shooter games often felt guilty.

"Games can be this really important tool for teaching people what the right decisions might be," he said. "Maybe one way to do that is showing what the consequences of wrong decisions would be."

Gaming has long been identified as a factor in obesity, which means being very overweight. Yet professor Chennan Liu found that those who play video games for three to six hours a day were healthier than those who played less.

Gaming might burn more calories than just watching TV, she believes. It also may be that kids holding a controller are not as likely to pick up a snack or a soda.

That theory made sense to Dan Wojtowicz, 18. He is a high school student in Illinois. Wojtowicz spends up to seven hours a day on "StarCraft II," "League of Legends" and other games.

“When I go on long gaming streaks, many times I don’t feel the need to eat as much,” he said. “I can go without eating for three to four hours.”

Your Brain On Video Games

The most interesting studies may look at how gaming affects the brain. Simone Kuhn is a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany. She found that the brain's prefrontal cortex actually grows thicker in people who play games. The prefrontal cortex is linked to people's personality and ability to make decisions. The changes he observed could improve memory and navigational ability he believes.

First-person shooter games are one of the most hated types of video games. However, Bavalier said they can help improve vision and the ability to pay attention.

Not everyone is sold on the idea that gaming is good for you. Joseph Bisoglio has studied the subject at Columbia University Medical Center in New York. He said that the scientific studies generally do not compare gaming with other activities that exercise the brain. Learning a new language or a musical instrument may have even greater effects than gaming, he said.

Gaming Opened A World

Doug Bakshis questioned the value of video games when his son Noah began to play “Minecraft” and other games for hours at a time. But then Noah, who has Asperger’s syndrome, a disability that affects his social skills, started opening up more.

Noah, now 15, said gaming has expanded his interests. He began studying archery and Japanese culture after seeing them in video games. His attention and focus have also improved, he said, as has his self-awareness.

Games helped him discover “what choices I would make in particular situations,” he said. “What I’ve found is I generally try to resolve things peacefully.”

Gamers can get really attached to the characters, “and that’s not a bad thing,” he said.