

Video games can improve mental health. Let's stop seeing them as a guilty pleasure

Many still regard video games as a waste of time or downright sinister. But the real story is very different

After an Oxford study [this week](#) showed that people who play more video games report greater wellbeing, the headlines reflected a sense of stunned incredulity. “Playing video games BENEFITS mental health,” exclaimed MailOnline, while Business Insider went with “Video games might actually be good for you.” My dad sent me a clipping from the Times, as he has done every time he’s seen video games mentioned in the paper for the past 15 years, that began with the words “parents beware”. Who’d have thunk it?

But why the surprise? For anyone who actually plays video games, this is hardly news. Video games are fun and interesting, and doing fun, interesting things makes you happy. Would we need a study to show that [watching a few episodes](#) of a beloved TV show makes you feel good, or that [sitting down with a good book](#) is relaxing? This year especially, video games have been an essential form of escapism and therapy for millions, and this study proves that I was hardly the only one devotedly [playing Animal Crossing](#) to decompress after an intense day of lockdown parenting. And that’s not to mention the 11-year-olds whose only meaningful social contact with other kids for months [was playing Roblox together](#).

If you look at the way video games are still predominantly covered on TV and in the news, however, it’s easy to see why a study about their positive effects might prompt such shock. It speaks to a bafflingly persistent negative stigma: video games are still seen by many as, at best, a waste of time, and at worst downright sinister. Coverage always focuses on how much money the video games industry makes, and how violent they may or may not be. Every time a game gets popular with kids, the columns and TV news segments take on a wary, alarmist tone, as if the nation’s children are all getting into heroin.

I’ve been on the sharp end of this baffling stigma since 2005, when I first started writing professionally about video games as a teenager. Even though I am now a grown woman with two children of my own, when I talk about games some people still adopt the tolerant expression that they would if a nine-year-old

was enthusiastically waving their copy of the Beano at them. Or, worse, they furrow their brows in concern, as if I've just admitted to a gambling habit. When Grand Theft Auto 5 [was released in 2013](#), I was interrogated in a studio by an increasingly hostile and incredulous radio interviewer, first about the game's violence and then about its pointlessness. "When I talk to people like you, I always think you ought to go and read a book," he eventually snapped. I told him I had a degree in comparative literature, which brought the interview to an end rather quickly.

Look, I'm not saying that spending your first year at university playing World of Warcraft instead of attending lectures is a brilliant idea, or that yelling at a teenager to turn off sodding Call of Duty while their dinner slowly cools on the table isn't extremely annoying. I'm also not denying that some people do develop an unhealthy relationship with video games: the World Health Organization's recent classification of "gaming disorder" is hotly disputed by experts, but it is harmful to deny the lived reality of the small number of people who [have experienced it](#). Some people also develop an unhealthy relationship with exercise or food or, in my partner's case, collecting records. Games can be a good way to delete time, but then so is endlessly rewatching Friends.

According to market research firm [Newzoo](#), there are nearly 3 billion gamers in the world. What the vast majority of them get out of their hobby is positive and life-enhancing. I cannot tell you how many people I've met who've credited games for helping them manage their depression, stress or anxiety, or just the everyday difficulties of life. When my first son was born, I spent a lot of time playing [The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild](#) on my Nintendo Switch. It was a way for me to reconnect with the person I used to be, and briefly escape the endless cycle of nappies, feeds and nerve-shredding screaming.

Will people ever finally stop characterising video games as either a guilty pleasure or an insidious force, and instead acknowledge that they are no different from film or music or TV? That there are good games and bad games, serious games and entertaining games, and that they make people happy? There are so many more interesting conversations to be had than "are video games somehow bad for you?" and "gosh, look how much money this industry makes". Try talking to people who actually play them, which these days is [85% of people under 35](#) and plenty of older folks too, and you'll find the real stories.