

Getting to The Heart of The Appeal of Videogames

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People spend 3 billion hours a week playing videogames but little is known scientifically about why they are actually fun in the first place.

The vast majority of research into videogames has concentrated on the possible harmful effects of playing videogames, ignoring the simple question of why people actually want to play them.

But new research led by scientists at the University of Essex sheds some light on the appeal of videogames and why millions of people around the world find playing them so much fun.

The study investigated the idea that many people enjoy playing videogames because it gives them the chance to “try on” characteristics which they would like to have as their ideal self.

The research is part of ongoing work by Dr Andy Przybylski, a visiting research fellow at Essex, into how videogames affect people by trying to understand what draws so many people to such a wide variety of games.

Due to be published in an upcoming issue of [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, the research found that gaming was the ideal platform for people to “try on different hats” and take on a characteristic they would like to have.

“A game can be more fun when you get the chance to act and be like your ideal self,” explained Dr. Przybylski. “The attraction to playing videogames and what makes them fun is that it gives people the chance to think about a role they would ideally like to take and then get a chance to play that role.”

The research found that giving players the chance to adopt a new identity during the game and acting through that new identity – be it a different gender, hero, villain – made them feel better about themselves and less negative.

Looking at the players’ emotion after play as well their motivation to play, the study found the enjoyment element of the videogames seemed to be greater when there was the least overlap between someone’s actual self and their ideal self.

“When somebody wants to feel they are more outgoing and then plays with this personality it makes them feel better in themselves when they play,” explained Dr. Przybylski.

Working with co-author Dr. Netta Weinstein, also from Department of Psychology at Essex, and academics in Germany and the United States, Dr. Przybylski’s research involved hundreds of casual game players in the laboratory and studied nearly a thousand dedicated gamers who played everything from The Sims and Call of Duty to World of Warcraft. Players were asked how they felt after playing in

relation to the attributes or characteristics of the persona they would ideally like to be.

Inspired by his games as a child with imaginative play, Dr. Przybylski was curious to see if the findings showed that games were used as a way of players escaping from themselves.

“However, I was heartened by the findings which showed that people were not running away from themselves but running towards their ideals. They are not escaping to nowhere they are escaping to somewhere.”

Watch this video for more information on Dr. Przybylski’s prior studies: