

Gamers, their search for inner meaning – and how that could transform the workplace

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Video games are sometimes accused of glorifying violence. But according to academics and researchers, games can have a hugely positive impact on individuals – and potentially society as a whole

Mark Smith



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While early games were quite basic in nature and could cause little offence, as graphics began to evolve in the 1990s games became capable of depicting more realistic scenarios such as violence, with some critics likening them to "video nasties" that could lead to people emulating their in-game behaviour in the real world.

One such example of censure that would soon follow was when the arcade game Mortal Kombat was launched on the Super Nintendo but had all the blood removed from its depiction of fighting between characters.

"Computer games are widely regarded as the 'cause' of many of society's tragedies," says Craig Weightman, lecturer in computer games programming at Staffordshire University. "However, with more than three billion hours a week engaged in global game-play, we would expect far more game-related crimes than we do, in fact, see."

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Despite the controversy, game-play has undoubtedly had a positive impact too, ranging from encouraging cooperation and teamwork, to improved hand-eye coordination and reasoning capabilities.

Mark Estdale is a games industry casting and performance director who has worked on more than a thousand games.

He says: "Video games are like any other game, from chess to rugby - they just happen to be on screen and are just as beneficial.

"I've a daughter transformed by them. She was the clumsiest of children, (she) broke, dropped, banged into everything with zero hand-eye coordination, that was until she played a Harry Potter game.

"Mastering the game helped her master the world."

But beyond the more obvious skills that a gamer can develop, could there be something deeper that could truly be harnessed for good?

One of the fundamental draws to games is what Weightman calls "epic meaning and calling" - the idea of doing or accomplishing something important.

"We have told stories to each other for millennia, and a large body of these stories contain heroes who uncover some meaning that they are meant to follow," he says.

"It's very clear that human beings search for meaning everywhere, and how we consume computer games as interactive, immersive stories should signify this drive."



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While games can contain a central theme that gives meaning and importance to the gamer's quest, ordinary life can often seem a little less purposeful, explains Weightman.

He says: "This is especially pertinent to the issue that many employers face with employee mental health. There is a strong association with the perception that one's day-to-day job doesn't have any actual meaning, other than for the employer's interests.

"This leads to the idea of being on a treadmill, going nowhere, which then leads to problems such as depression."

Taking inspiration from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Weightman's research is aimed at harnessing this sense of meaning and looks at the unconscious behaviour of players - what they do when they're not thinking too much and are, instead, exhibiting their natural behaviours.

"By observing player behaviour in a game, we can map out personality types and skill set predispositions of the player," he says.

"There is much work in existence on player types and their characteristics. A study by Richard Bartle first showed that there might be four simple player types: the killer (not as bad as it sounds), the explorer, the socialiser, and the achiever. These types, and their more nuanced relatives, relate to personality types that might be uncovered in psychometric tests."

Weightman says research data is still being collected, but he adds that there is strong evidence that what is driving gamers is this search for "inner meaning". He hopes the research will inform not only how digital systems are designed, but also the future workplace.

"Companies that focus on human needs tend to get more done and grow faster," he says.

"We are seeing [this] with the likes of Virgin and Google, which focus on the humanity of the workforce, rather than just on what is produced."

Weightman's research is just part of a range of work being undertaken by Staffordshire University, which has recently opened Digital Institute London at the Here East campus in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The site is designed to offer students from around the world the chance to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their careers in the future.

Rachel Gowers, director of Staffordshire University's Digital Institute London, says: "By giving graduates a set of skills and attributes that encourages them to take risks, make mistakes and be daring, we are actually preparing them for jobs of the future, such as cloud architects, full-stack developers, digital archaeologists and even roles that may not yet exist."

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