

# Beyond the beat-em-up: Video games are good for young people

August 30 2013, by Daniel Johnson, Christian Jones & Jane Burns

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There's an emerging body of research focusing on the potential positive influences of video games. Credit: Rebecca Pollard

Research and media attention has usually focused on possible negative impacts of video games. But a clear case to support such links is yet to emerge and even people who argue that video games have a negative impact acknowledge that any such [effect size is relatively small](#).

Now, there's an emerging body of research focusing on the potential positive influences of video games.

Our research group conducted a [comprehensive review](#) of research papers and reports from around the world to explore the role of video games in young people's lives.

We are interested in both gaming and positive psychology, so our aim was to investigate the current research linking video game play and flourishing mental health. We reviewed over 200 papers and mapped relevant connections and associations.

We found that playing video games positively influences young people's emotional state, vitality, engagement, competence and self-acceptance. And that it's associated with higher self-esteem, optimism, resilience, healthy relationships and social connections and functioning.

Clearly excessive video game play and technology use is not good for mental health and we acknowledge that excessive play is associated with negative outcomes, such as anxiety and insomnia.

But the overall picture turns the view that playing video games makes us socially isolated, aggressive, and lazy, on its head. Instead, our research suggests that, in the majority of cases, video games can actually contribute to three different aspects of young people's well-being – emotional, social and psychological.

Here are some of our key findings:

- moderate (non-excessive) levels of playing are associated with positive emotions and improved mood, improved emotion regulation and emotional stability and the reduction of emotional disturbances;

- playing video games is a healthy means of relaxation, stress reduction and socialising; and
- people who play video games in moderation have significantly less depressed mood and higher self-esteem (compared to those who don't play or who play excessively).

Emerging research suggests that how young people play, as well as with whom they play, may be more important in terms of well-being than what they play.

Feelings of relatedness or flow while playing, and playing with people you know are better predictors of well-being than the genre of game played.

Our research opens the door to using video games in approaches to well-being. Translating this research into practical guidelines about gaming and well-being that can be used by parents and professionals is critical.

There are several ways of doing this. One is a "well-being rating system" that we are developing for games.

In contrast to existing rating systems, which highlight negative aspects of games, such as violence or offensive language, our rating system identifies their likely positive influences, such as which games are likely to foster teamwork and connections with others.

We know that video games captivate their audience, with more than 95% of Australian homes with children under the age of 18 owning a device for playing them.

Our research provides an opportunity to use video games as a way to empower young people to manage their own mental health and well-being, and potentially circumvent psychological distress.

Key questions remain for future research including identifying what constitutes a healthy or moderate amount of play for people at different stages of their lives and how best to leverage the well-being benefits of video games in a therapeutic setting.

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