Video games can be beneficial for post-work recovery

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Level up your work/life balance. Credit: The World According to Marty, CC BY-ND

Videogames have a had a particularly bad rap lately, not least after a UK coroner suggested a link between Call of Duty and teenage suicide. But recent evidence suggests that gaming can be good for us and, in particular, can help us unwind after a stressful day at work.

Many of us spend much of our working days immersed in technology. A smartphone or tablet comes with many advantages, such as flexible working, but the spread of work-based technology can add to stress too. Many people complain about the constant pressure to reply to e-mails as soon as they are received, even if that's at 10 o'clock at night.

And even if we do switch off from work, technology is often at the centre of our home life. Watching a favourite show, keeping up to date with social media or reading online blogs are a vital component of many people's evening activities. And while videogames were once seen as the preserve of teenagers, they have grown exponentially in popularity in recent years, largely because players no longer need a specialist console to enjoy them.

Roughly [1 out of every 4 UK adults](#), across ages and genders, now plays some kind of digital game at least once a week. Despite this rising popularity, digital games rarely make headlines for anything positive. Before the most recent controversy about suicide, they have been blamed for a variety of negative effects, including [causing Attention Deficit Disorder](#) [encouraging acts of violence](#) and [antisocial behaviour](#). At the very least, they are perceived to be a bit of a waste of time, with no real, external value.

But our recent evidence suggests that not only can digital games be good for you, they may also be beneficial for your work life. Post-work [recovery](#) is a vital part of feeling prepared for the next day because it's when you replenish the mental resources you used up during the daily grind. And it's beginning to look like the type of activity you do during this period is important too.

Activities such as playing team [sports and socialising have been found to benefit recovery](#) but for many, this requires dedication, time and resources that simply aren't available. So turning to activities that can be

performed for brief periods of time in any location could be an ideal solution. This is exactly where digital games fit in.

Unwinding online

Our work has built on [previous studies](link) that found that those who play digital games are better recovered than those who don't. We were interested in whether the type of game is important; the experience of playing [casual games](link) such as [2048](link) is likely to be very different to that of playing Call of Duty, for example. We asked participants to estimate how much time they spent playing a variety of genres of digital games in a week and then got them to complete a questionnaire to assess how much interference they experienced from work while at home and how well they recovered after gaming. They were also asked about the social support they receive from others, both on and offline.

Those who played digital games were more recovered and experienced less work-home interference than those who didn't. And the more time people spent playing, the more recovered they felt. First-person shooter games were particularly beneficial.

While no one genre helped with every aspect of recovery, many were good for one or another. Massive multiplayer online games, which generally involve completing challenges of increasing difficulty, were good for giving players a sense of mastery. Action games, on the other hand, were related to relaxation.

We also found that out of those who claimed to have formed relationships as a result of the digital games they played, the extent of recovery was influenced by the amount of [social support](link) they had online. This suggests that digital games are effective in helping with recovery from [work](link) at least in part because they provide an opportunity to socialise.

This particular study can't establish conclusively that the games the participants played were directly responsible for the improved recovery. It may just be that those who play digital games may simply have more time available to recover. But the findings do go some way to suggest that this causal link is possible. We are currently in the process of running more controlled studies, testing whether digital games directly improve recovery, and if so, whether the kind of game or level of immersion are important factors.

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