

Good game?

Playing video games can make you a better person.

Video games get a bad press. Many are unquestionably violent and, as has been the way with new media from novels to comic books to television, they have been accused of corrupting the moral fabric of youth. Nor are such accusations without merit. There is a body of research suggesting that violent games can lead to aggressive thoughts, if not to violence itself. But not all games are shoot-'em-ups, and what is less examined is whether those that reward more constructive behaviour also have lingering impacts. That, however, is starting to change. Two studies showing that video games have a bright side as well as a dark one have been carried out recently.

One, to be published in June by the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, was conducted by Douglas Gentile, of Iowa State University's media research laboratory. He and his colleagues tested the effects of playing so-called "pro-social" games on children and young adults in three countries.

A group of 161 American students played one of six games for 20 minutes. Some were given "Ty2" or "Crash Twinsanity", both of which involve cartoonish fighting and destruction. Others were assigned "Chibi-Robo!", which involves helping characters in the game by doing their chores, or "Super Mario Sunshine", in which players clean up pollution and graffiti. A third group, acting as a control, played "Pure Pinball" or "Super Monkey Ball Deluxe", both of which involve guiding a ball through mazes.

Their games over, the participants were asked to choose 11 of 30 easy, medium or hard shape-based puzzles for a partner to complete, and told that their partner would receive a \$10 gift voucher if he could complete ten of them. Those who had been playing pro-social games were significantly more likely to help their partner by selecting easy puzzles. The opposite was true for those assigned violent games.

The other parts of Dr Gentile's study looked at established behaviour. In one, a group of 680 Singaporeans aged 12-14 were asked to list their three favourite games and state the number of hours they played. They were then given questionnaires, the answers to which suggested that those who spent the longest playing games which involved helping others were most likely to help, share, co-operate and empathise with others. They also had lower scores in tests for hostile thoughts and the acceptance of violence as normal. In the second, Japanese aged 10-17 were asked how much time they spent playing games in which the main character helps others. When questioned three to four months later, those who played these types of games the most were also rated as more helpful to those around them in real life.

Screened for virtue

These two, later, parts of Dr Gentile's study might, of course, just be proving that nice people prefer pro-social games. But a second controlled experiment, by Tobias Greitemeyer of the University of Sussex, in England, and Silvia Osswald of Ludwig-Maximilian University, in Munich, confirms the gist of Dr Gentile's conclusions. In this piece of research (to be published later this year, also in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology), Dr Greitemeyer and Dr Osswald asked 46 German students to play one of two classic games. In the pro-social one, "Lemmings", the aim is to protect rodents from various dangers. By contrast "Tetris" acted as a neutral control. In this game players rotate falling shapes so that they slot neatly together instead of saving self-destructive furry animals.

Playtime over, the students were asked to say what happens next in three incomplete stories involving a driver and a cyclist who narrowly miss colliding; two friends, one of whom is unapologetic despite being repeatedly late; and a diner speaking to a restaurant manager after waiting for an hour to be served and then having food spilt on him. Those who had played "Lemmings" suggested endings in which the characters in the stories exhibited significantly fewer aggressive thoughts, responses and actions than the ones suggested by the "Tetris" players.

The upshot of both studies is that video games are like any other medium. Feed the user with aggressive thoughts and you risk making him aggressive. Feed him with the milk of human kindness and the opposite will probably happen. No great surprise, perhaps. But a salutary reminder both that the older generation should not rush to judgment on youthful habits it does not understand, and that the medium is not always the message.

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