

Gaming does not appear harmful to mental health, unless the gamer can't stop

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Video gaming: Although today's research suggests gaming may only be a negative influence only for those who feel compelled to game, rather than all users, there is much more to be learned, according to the Oii research. Credit: Shutterstock

Societies may tremble when a hot new video game is released, but the hours spent playing popular video games do not appear to be damaging players' mental health, according to the largest-ever survey of nearly 40,000 gamers and their gaming habits, which was conducted over six weeks by a team from Oxford's Internet Institute. That does not mean,

however, that the research did not throw up some concerns—and, the team argues, much more information is needed before tech regulators can really rest easy.

The research, published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, found no [causal link](#) between gaming and poor mental health—whatever sort of games are being played. But Professor Andrew K. Przybylski, OII Senior Research Fellow, says the research did show a distinct difference in the experience of gamers who play "because they want to" and those who play "because they feel they have to."

He maintains, "We found it really does not matter how much gamers played [in terms of their sense of well-being]. It wasn't the quantity of gaming, but the quality that counted...if they felt they had to play, they felt worse. If they played because they loved it, then the data did not suggest it affected their mental health. It seemed to give them a strong positive feeling."

The ground-breaking survey of gamers was the most comprehensive to date, taking in multiple platforms and seven different games, including basic games, such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, racing simulators such as *Gran Turismo Sport* and more competitive games, such as *Apex Legends* and *Eve Online*. And, says Professor Przybylski, there was no difference in impact on mental health—whether [game](#) involved moving to a new town with talking animals, as in *Animal Crossing*, or taking part in a battle royal-style game, such as *Apex Legends*.

Players own their gaming data, which is accumulated by the platforms, and nearly 40,000 people gave permission for it to be used for this research. Previous studies have often involved players keeping diaries of their reactions to gaming. The access to [real-time](#) gaming data gave only a tantalizing insight into the impact of gaming, though, says Professor Przybylski. And, although the OII has made the data available to other

academics, it is a drop in the ocean in terms of possible available data and only offers limited access.

Professor Przybylski explains, "About 1 billion people are playing video games worldwide. There are 3,000 games on the Nintendo platform alone. People play multiple games—and we were able to access information about 39,000 people playing just seven popular games."

In order to answer the questions that parents, such as he, want answered, Professor Przybylski says, "We need to collect large representative samples and we need to do it at the platform level. Looking at just seven games, is like looking at seven foodstuffs—when you know Tesco's and the other supermarkets, sell thousands of different foods and shoppers fill diverse trollies'

As well as being a parent, Professor Przybylski has grown up playing games himself and, he says, such research is essential to understanding the real impact of gaming on the individual. Although today's research suggests gaming may only be a negative influence only for those who feel compelled to game, rather than all users, there is much more to be learned.

"These are just the first steps into the world of understanding how gaming fits into gamers' lives," he says. "And it seems that why you are playing is the key factor. This is an exciting study, but there is a lot of work still to do."

But months of negotiations with the gaming platforms, about the use of the data, preceded the [research](#), followed by months of analysis. Analyzing the data itself was the easy bit, says Professor Przybylski. The Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo platforms have [complex relationships](#) with hundreds of game developers and it is tricky to get everyone to agree that independent and rigorous science is in their players' best

interests. But, Professor Przybylski points out, the data belongs to the gamers—not to the platforms and not to the [game developers](#), "Gamers have the legal right to donate their data...it would be an amazing step forward if we collected data at the [platform](#) level."

He adds, "Players want to know what impact gaming has. Scientists want to know. Parents want to know. The Government wants to know. I want to know...and the information is there. This data needs to be open and it needs to be easy to share."

Professor Przybylski concludes, "If the big gaming platforms care about their players' well-being, they need to empower players and scientists to learn about how their products influence us, for good or ill."

More information: Matti Vuorre et al, Time spent playing video games is unlikely to impact well-being, *Royal Society Open Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.220411](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.220411)

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