

# Video games + lockdown = good match for mental health

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Worries about too much screen-time may be ill-founded

When the pandemic put a stop to normal life, many people switched on their games consoles. Video-game internet traffic in America rose by 75% within a week in March, as many states went into lockdown, according to Verizon, a telecoms firm. Sony has struggled to ship enough of its latest PlayStation consoles to meet demand. And one of this year's most popular games, "Animal Crossing: New Horizons", sold more than 14m copies between April and September (it is close to becoming the biggest-selling game for Nintendo's latest console). Players of the game boast on social media of racking up hundreds of hours simulating life on an island full of talking creatures. Too much screen time? On the contrary, a new study concludes that this may be time well spent.

Researchers at the University of Oxford collected data on the gaming habits and mental health of players in Britain and North America of two video games. Some 2,537 of the participants, with an average age of 31, played "Animal Crossing: New Horizons" and 468, with an average age of 35, played "Plants vs Zombies: Battle for Neighborville". The researchers worked with the developers of the games to record when participants played during August and September (when asked to self-report, people tended to overestimate their playing time). They also measured the players' well-being, by surveying how often they reported experiencing each of six positive and six negative feelings over the previous two weeks.

The researchers found that people who played the games for longer reported feeling better, on average, than those who barely played at all (see chart). They stopped short of claiming that playing time directly affected well-being, noting that people who already felt good might have been more inclined to pick up a controller. Nor did they look at the effect of playing on people who are not habitual gamers. They did find, however, that certain feelings provided by video games, such as a sense of freedom and competence, improved the players' sense of well-being while they played. A greater feeling of social connection from playing with others in the game, crucial when friends cannot meet in person, also boosted their mood.

Many policymakers do not share this positive view of video-gaming. Earlier this year Britain's government announced plans for a regulator to protect children from "excessive screen time", and the World Health Organisation has identified "gaming disorder" as addictive behaviour. There is a lack of robust evidence for many of the supposed harmful effects of video games, according to Andrew Przybylski, one of the academics behind the study. More research is needed to ensure that gamers, especially young ones, are adequately protected without spoiling their fun (the gamers in the study were well into adulthood). But worries about too much gaming may be overblown. There are many worse ways to pass the time during lockdowns.