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## Video games can power up from merely fun to meaningful experiences

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It may be game over for critics who claim that video games are nothing more than a fun diversion. A team of researchers suggests that many games can be meaningful entertainment experiences for players.

In a study of people's experiences with video games, players indicated that they not only enjoyed playing games, but that they also frequently appreciated them at a deeper, more meaningful level. These findings should be encouraging to video game developers who want to invest in producing games that examine more meaningful, poignant or contemplative topics.

"Video games are often stereotyped as something that is just fun and entertaining, but not something that is deeply appreciated," said Mary Beth Oliver, Distinguished Professor in Media Studies and co-director of Media Effects Research Laboratory, Penn State. "Video games do not seem to have the same critical acclaim as, for example, books and plays or even music."

Participants in the study suggested that story details in the game were critical to feelings of appreciation. They also indicated that more meaningful games were associated with heightened feelings of insight or enrichment.

"That insight could be anything from an emotion or virtue -- like courage -- to an insight on human spirituality," said Oliver.

The researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, said games may hold promise of providing players with enriching or gratifying experiences.

"It's certainly true that there are some games that are silly or shallow, but that's the case for almost all forms of entertainment," said Oliver. "Our research suggests that contrary to stereotypes, games have the potential to be as meaningful to players as other, more esteemed forms of entertainment such as literature or cinema."

Games may also provide players the opportunity to experience valuable situations and emotions that other forms of entertainment may not do as frequently, Oliver added.

"Whereas viewers and readers typically watch characters make decisions in movies and books, many video games allow the player to actually make those choices, resulting in feelings such as guilt or pride," she added.

Creating games with more interactive and more meaningful story lines is a challenge for developers, but could be worth the investment, the researchers indicate.

The increased focus on narrative and emotions is a natural evolution in video games, said Nick Bowman, assistant professor of communication studies and a research associate, West Virginia University, who worked with Oliver.

"The earliest video games really had very little in common with other forms of narrative entertainment," said Bowman. "Games have grown from simple point-and-click twitch games to incredibly engrossing emotional experiences and games now have the potential to give us the same sorts of feelings that great novels and music do."

For example, Bowman said at one point in the game *Spec Ops*, the player is faced with the moral decision to use chemical weapons on an enemy. One consequence of choosing to do so is that innocent refugees are victims of the attack. The player is forced to witness the results of his or her actions, triggering a mix of emotions.

"Such an experience gives players a space to challenge how they see the world, just as movies like *Schindler's List* or novels like *Animal Farm*, did for past audiences," said Bowman. "Video games have grown up."

In the study, 512 video game players were assigned to one of two random groups and asked to recall games that were particularly fun or particularly meaningful. They then rated their perceptions about the game. While participants reported that they found both types were fun to play, they said they had more appreciation for the more meaningful games they played.

**Story Source:**

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**Journal Reference:**

1. Mary Beth Oliver, Nicholas David Bowman, Julia K. Woolley, Ryan Rogers, Brett I. Sherrick, Mun-Young Chung. **Video Games as Meaningful Entertainment Experiences..** *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2015; DOI: [10.1037/ppm0000066](https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000066)
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