Study suggests video games can help mental health

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Nintendo Switch game consoles on display at Nintendo's official store in Tokyo, Japan. Photo: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

Playing video games might be good for your mental health. That's according to a recent study by scientists at Oxford University. Oxford is a university in England.

A person's mental health affects how they feel, think, and act. Scientists have many questions about how video games affect mental health. They want to understand whether video games can change a player's mood and behavior. Do games improve or harm mental health?

To study this, the researchers needed two pieces of information. The first is how much time people spent playing. The second is how they felt about the experience.

In the Oxford study, players gave the scientists information about their emotions. The game time data, however, was provided by game makers. This was a rare partnership between the scientists and the video game industry. In the past, game makers have not wanted to provide data to scientists who were studying the effects of gaming.

Players Played Games, Answered Questions

The research results are based on survey responses. People ages 18 and older took the survey. Some of them played the game Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville. This game was made by the company Electronic Arts. Others played Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Nintendo of America made Animal Crossing.

About 2,750 players of Animal Crossing and 518 players of Plants vs. Zombies responded to the survey. They answered questions about how they felt playing these games. Their responses were then matched up to how much time they spent playing.

The game company provided information about playtime. They were able to get it directly from the players' game devices. This way, the scientists knew it was exact. This was new. Previous scientific research depended on guesses from the players about how long they had been playing.

Play Time Had A Small Effect

The researchers found that how much time a person spent playing video games had a small effect on their feelings of well-being. This means that in some cases, playing for a longer amount of time can boost a person's mood and emotions.

The study also showed that how much enjoyment the players got from a certain game had an impact, too. It may be even more important than playtime. In other words, how happy a game makes you while you play it may have a bigger effect on mental health than how much time you spend playing.

The paper has not been peer reviewed yet. Peer review is when one group of scientists look over the research done by other scientists. They come to an agreement on whether the research was done well and is accurate.

Some scientists who were not part of the study said it showed strengths.

Paul Croarkin was one of those scientists. He is a psychiatrist, a doctor who studies illnesses of the mind. Croarkin has studied video gaming and children. He said it is good that the data on playtime came from the game makers. That makes it more accurate.

Croarkin did have a few questions about the study. He said the self-reporting nature of the survey was a weakness. It would be better if there was another way to measure the players' feelings of happiness.

Study Still Needs Review

Other scientists noted that the study was limited.

Joseph Hilgard is an assistant professor at Illinois State University. He studies how people can affect one another's feelings and behaviors.

Hilgard said that we cannot know for sure whether it was the video games people played that made them feel good. The study does not show this, he said. For example, players who took part in the study may have been playing games other than Animal Crossing and Plants vs. Zombies. Playtime was not tracked for any other games. Maybe those games had a positive or negative effect on well-being, too.