

What videogames have meant to me

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To start, I've been playing videogames for nearly thirty years now. Some of my earliest memories involve some heavy hitters such as the first *Super Mario Bros*, *Duck Hunt*, and *Donkey Kong Country*. Of the hobbies I've enjoyed, it's THE hobby. Because of this investment, I've always had one ear open to hear what others say about it, whether it's family and friends, news programs/politicians (yikes), medical experts, and so on. There have always been stigmas present around videogames. I do have some opinions on what others say about videogames as a whole, but also, I'd like to talk about why they've been such a large part of my life.

I realize that since it's my favorite hobby, I come into this subject full well knowing that I have some biases here. However, my own experiences have been quite different from a lot of the negative stereotypes that I see floating around. I think that the way videogames are viewed has definitely shifted a bit in recent years, for the better. So why has this hobby been so important to me personally?

One of the knocks on videogames has always been that it's a non-social activity. It's a solo act. Playing games means that you've isolated yourself from others and are hurting your social skills by doing so. For myself, some of my earliest gaming memories involve my brother or a couple of my closest friends. Before the days of many games including multiplayer, we would often sit there with someone and watch them play. It wasn't just watching though. We'd offer encouragement, try to notice things the other person might miss, and share the anguish of a game over as if it happened to us too. Even if the game was entirely single player, there often was a social component to it.

On that note of partaking in a hobby by yourself, I think that mindset is a reach anyway. I enjoy reading books. This is a completely solo hobby, and if you really start to dig into it, reading a novel and playing a videogame are not so different. However, I don't ever remember reading being linked to holding someone back socially. Back on track, from a very early age, videogames were so fun for me. This should always be the big priority in a hobby. Especially in your formative years, before all those big responsibilities start to creep into your life, your instinct is to find things that you enjoy doing. For me, gaming

was the first hobby that I found. There would be others that would say things like “You shouldn’t be sitting inside playing games.” As if the act of doing this would have irreversible consequences later in life. As if me going outside and playing in the dirt would inevitably lead to a comfy six figure salary someday.

One thing I don’t think videogames ever get enough credit for is what they can teach kids. A lot of games that I grew up playing were extremely difficult. The Nintendo and Super Nintendo each had no shortage of challenging games. In some cases, I was simply not good enough to beat the games completely. Or, I didn’t invest enough time to make it happen. Nevertheless, my hand-eye coordination would probably be considerably worse today if not for all these years of gaming. Other ways in which games can benefit is teaching perseverance, not just through trial and error, but also in noticing details, patterns, and using them to make forward progress.

I think one big thing that games can also teach is self-reliance. Throughout our lives, we’ve probably all met or knew someone who really doesn’t have the ability to entertain themselves. Whether it’s doing something as part of a group or having that innate desire to be the focus of others’ attention, they might struggle when they’re in a circumstance where they’re left alone for a stretch of time. No matter who you are, there will be times in your life when no one is around in the moment to keep you entertained. So for that reason alone, you better have some hobby that you can enjoy without the company of others.

I want to be clear that I’m not trying to discourage spending time with others or being sociable. Those are both great qualities to have. In the last ten years, I’ve become much more sociable and comfortable talking with others. I feel that I can do it pretty comfortably nowadays. I’m so glad that I put in the work to get where it’s significantly more comfortable. However, due in no small part to videogames, times when I’m by myself, I have absolutely zero issues coming up with something to do. Between all the videogames I’ve already enjoyed, or the thousands that I’ve never played, I have endless opportunities. As long as I still enjoy playing games, I never have to worry about that “what do I do now?” feeling engulfing me. It’s that self-reliance that videogames helped instill in me at a young age. Boredom is something that I’ve very rarely had to deal with in my thirty-five years.

There have been stretches where I've also really suffered with anxiety and self-esteem issues. My freshman and sophomore years of high school are the biggest example of this. Like many young adults, I was stricken with acne on my face during these years. My weight also got to its peak during these years. In school, I did probably the worst I ever did in the classroom. And it wasn't for a lack of trying. It wasn't because I wasn't paying attention in class. Certain subjects (like math) just hit me hard and I couldn't grasp certain concepts quickly. Learning Spanish during these two years also frustrated me with the same issues. Seeing friends and other students pick up concepts much easier and quicker made the frustration even worse. In so many ways, life became frustrating and anxiety became a real issue.

It's perfectly feasible here for someone to say I was spending too much time playing videogames. You know what? I don't have the hard facts to say you'd be wrong in saying that. What I can tell you is that videogames still were able to help me in a big way. While sitting in math class or Spanish class and struggling to do algebra problems or piecing together that sentence in a foreign language, I knew that coming up (especially on weekends) would be some time I could devote to playing videogames. I knew that when I played games, I wouldn't be worrying about my school struggles, I wouldn't be giving myself a sideways glance in a mirror, looking at the size of my stomach or the new zit on my nose. Instead, I'd be enjoying myself in a world that was foreign to me, a huge fantasy open-world experience with vast mountains, a sci-fi universe with entire planets and civilizations that were just waiting to explore, or I'd get placed on a war-torn battlefield in 1944.

On the last example, videogames helped establish my love of history, specifically military history. Love might not be the right word for it, as I certainly don't love anything about war. It's horrific beyond my own comprehension. More like an unquenchable fascination. In grade school, these seeds were first planted when I discovered games such as *Day of Defeat* (still my all-time favorite videogame) and *Battlefield 1942*. While these games sometimes were more like exaggerated comic book versions of the depicted events, such as the case with *Battlefield 1942*, they could still introduce me to so much. The names of planes, tanks, and weapons were accurate to history. I'd start to hear names of maps, like Operation Market Garden, Omaha Beach, and Wake Island. I'd be using and learning about weapons I liked more than others, such as the German K98 bolt-action rifle, or the American Thompson submachine gun.

These videogames were a massive springboard into so much history that was waiting for me to discover. An added benefit was that I became more focused in my history classes, wanting to know what was happening in the world that led to such terrible moments and wars. Videogames helped give birth to an entirely new hobby for me. And, like videogames, I still have the fascination with history today too. One thing I've been very excited to see is that in the last ten to fifteen years, a new boom of more authentic first-person shooter videogames has emerged. Games that really do teach players about the subject matter with an eye to accurately portray history. I've enjoyed several of these games spanning different wars and eras. Games like *Verdun* and *Isonzo* helped increase my understanding and interest in World War I. For World War II, more authentic experiences have come through games such as *Day of Infamy*, *Red Orchestra*, *Rising Storm*, and *Hell Let Loose*. Even though they're pretty rare, *Rising Storm 2: Vietnam* established a new interest in that conflict by being one of the few to cover this controversial war.

Thankfully, videogames have had a bit of an image shift in recent years. They're much more popular and widely accepted in culture today. Gone are the days of the supreme nerd stereotypes. Now, professional athletes, actors/actresses, and all other industries have large numbers of gamers amongst them. With wider outlooks on the hobby, there will still be concerning or slightly delusional takes on the "harmful effects" they bring to the table. While certainly not as loudly, there are still those that point a finger at videogames when tragic mass shootings take place. I'll never quite understand why violent movies always escape that same kind of scrutiny. To my knowledge, there's still been no data to suggest playing violent videogames leads to an increased chance of violent behavior. Thankfully, the fervor with which politicians aim to regulate or rid society of certain types of videogames has died out to a large degree. There are certain types of games I myself steer clear of, but when I talk about politicians angling to remove them, I'm speaking strictly about what's viewed as violent games.

Maybe the biggest accusation that's been leveled against videogames is that of being an ultimate time-waster. I think it's getting harder and harder to make this argument in today's culture of social media. A lot of the same people probably spend hours each day pouring through their feeds on various platforms. Almost all of us are guilty of this to some degree. Is playing videogames for a few hours really a bigger waste than browsing what at times can be a cesspool on the internet? Depending on who you talk to, you could

get all kinds of different opinions one way or the other. I'm not going to argue that gaming is a great use of time, but there are so many ways to waste it, that targeting one is like finding a needle in a haystack.

Ultimately, I'm glad that today, this hobby isn't looked down on like it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Also, I'm glad that I can enjoy it just as much now as when I was younger. If I have children of my own, I definitely don't see myself trying to push them towards gaming. At most I might introduce them to it, along with a few classics. If they gravitate to it and have genuine interest, awesome. If not, that's perfectly fine too. Acceptance of gaming should be viewed like any other hobby someone has. If it's not creating self-destructive results, or causing any harm to others, no one should have any issues with it. Gaming has benefited me at different points, whether helping me forget about anxiety or stress in school, relaxing after a brutal day of work, discovering interesting new worlds or history that made me want to learn more, and it's even helped me create lasting memories with my family and friends.