

Your brain on video games: lucid dreaming, POV changes, resistance to nightmares

Jan 21, 2014

Regular gamers have likely, at one point or another, noticed a pronounced **video game**-esque feel in a dream here or there, maybe finding themselves caught up in the dream world of the last game they binge played or, conversely, transforming an ordinary dream into something akin to a preferred type of video game. If you're one of those gamers, you're not alone.

Grant MacEwan University psychologist Jayne Gackenbach became intrigued with the idea of video games transforming so-called hardcore gamers' brains, altering the way both dreams and waking life are experienced, when her son took up gaming in the 90s. Since that time, Gackenbach has produced multiple studies, and over the course of her **research** she has pinpointed multiple changes hardcore gamers experience: lucid dreaming, resistance to nightmares, the ability to change point of view, and more.

The definition of "hardcore gamer" in this instance is someone who plays and has played video games more than two hours per session, doing so for several sessions over the course of a week, since before third grade. This kind of regular prolonged **gaming** changes the way gamers experience dreams, and could further lead to revelations of how game playing alters one's interaction with the waking world, as well. *The Verge* points to her latest paper, *Dreaming*, where she and colleagues reveal hardcore gamers experience more lucid dreams than non-gaming individuals, with lucid dreaming being the act of taking control of a dream. That particular aspect of her research isn't new, previously indicated by her research some ten years ago. What is new are refinements on the understanding in what way these lucid dreams manifest.

Namely, hardcore gamers are often able to switch between a third- and first-person point of view much in the same way they do in video games, and, more revealing, their lucid control in the dream often only exists over their own person -- meaning, gamers control their dream like a video game, functioning as a lucid character in a world they otherwise can't necessarily alter.

Another interesting finding is how hardcore gaming affects the gamer's experience and reaction to nightmares -- they grow resistant to them, in the sense that bad dreams aren't as likely to wake them up, and gamers are more likely to take control of them (as a lucid main character) and, perhaps, even find them enjoyable. This has rolled over into a theory that gaming can have an effect in dealing with real-life waking threats, as well. Rounding it all out is a finding that regular gamers are more likely to have dreams of a bizarre nature, containing more fantastical elements and imaginative creations that those who don't play video games.

Between all the research and findings resides a mystery that is still to be unraveled, however -- the effects on nightmares seem to apply primarily to male gamers. Whether this has to do with a social element between the genders or something else entirely is still to be researched, but says Gackenbach, "At least for male gamers, gaming seems to be sort of protective against nightmares, and that can largely be seen as a good thing, the threat is less upsetting, and doesn't wake you up."