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Get Ready for the Gamer Generation

By Adam Carstens and John Beck

“Sooner or later, those who grew up without video games will have to understand the gamers.”

There is a new generation of workers taking over key positions in your organization and in your classrooms. This generation is younger, yes, but they’re also different in ways that will definitely change how business is done and how learning is accomplished. Our research shows that the way they spent their formative years has given them an entirely different set of skills from those who came before. They are different from their predecessors in significant and verifiable ways, and we believe those differences are driven by one central factor: growing up playing video games. The results of our research are chronicled in the book *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Beck & Wade, 2004).

This “game generation” will soon outnumber their elders in the workplace. Their way of thinking will soon pass the business tipping point and become standard operating procedure. Sooner or later, those who grew up without video games will have to understand the gamers. That means not only learning what they’re all about, but finding ways to redesign educational and training curricula around their needs.

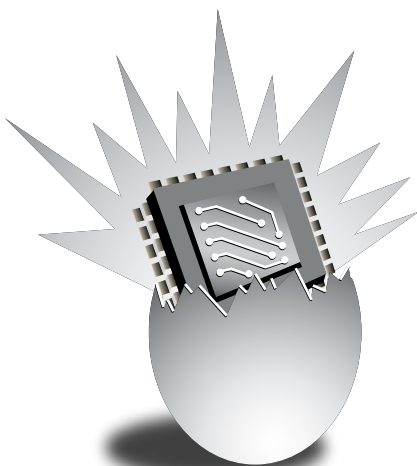
Games have a huge impact

If that sounds unlikely, you may — like many people — have overlooked just what a force video games have become. But games are not a “niche” any more. Americans now spend more money on video games each year than they do going to the movies, and more time at home playing video games than watching rented movies. Already, five out of every ten Americans — about 145 million consumers and employees — play video games in one form or another (ESA, nd). But to most outside the video game industry, games are still practically invisible. Most professionals know games exist, of course, but still view them as a child’s toy. But many of your co-workers and students have already spent billions of dollars, and billions of hours, in the virtual worlds created by these machines. Many of their most precious childhood memories revolve around these games.

Games are a powerful information technology, unique in history, and radically different from technologies that came just before, such as television. Games and their powerful interactivity and reinforcement of particular behaviors, as opposed to the one way delivery of television, have created an entirely new individual — and as a result, new and different needs for training.

Forming the neural pathways

Research into the development of the brain has shown early childhood and adolescence are the critical years for how the brain is prepared for perceiving and



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reacting to the world around it. As evidenced by Paus and co-authors, “Structural maturation of individual brain regions and their connecting pathways is a condition sine qua non for the successful development of cognitive, motor, and sensory functions.” Such structural maturation of these fiber pathways occurs continually throughout adolescence, but then fades as people reach adulthood (Paus et al., 1999). Thus, these critical years often leave our brains with a particular set of assumptions and beliefs about how the world works. While their opinions about specific matters may change, their basic operating system has largely taken shape by the time they enter the workforce.

Around the early 1980s, video games started to take more of children’s time. After school, in the evening, on the weekend — games began to invade the free time of adolescents and children alike. The percentage of those who played them steadily rose from the low single digits to a near universal presence today. New data from the Kaiser Family Foundation shows 8-10 year olds spend more than an hour a day with video games (Rideout et al., 2005). The immense amount of time spent with games during a child’s formative years has led them to be literally “hard wired” in a different way than those who came before.

Games created a new belief system

Games are now pervasive among those now in the workforce — with more than 4 out of 5 managers under age 34 reporting they have significant video game experience (Figure 1).

Games reinforce certain beliefs about the self, how the world should work, how people relate to one another and finally, about the goals of life in general. Games create a self-centered universe where the player is running the show, and can manipulate other people and objects to his or her will (within certain rules, of course).

To confirm these new beliefs, we commissioned a study of 2,500 Americans, mainly business professionals, followed by numerous personal interviews within that group (Beck & Wade, 2004). Our group included a wide range of ages, women as well as men, with all levels of gaming experience. We also deployed a carefully selected group of questions used and found reliable in numerous past surveys. We used these questions to explore how gamers (defined as those who had grown up playing video games) think and feel about their work compared to non-gamers. What we found surprised and delighted us, as gamers showed a range of different opinions and behaviors compared to their non-gamer brethren.

For example, instead of trying to seek “one” answer, games teach there are many potential paths to “victory,” and one should try as many as possible to see what happens. Victory is possible — the game designer wouldn’t have made the game without one. And the cost of failure is low if not zero — all that is required is another token or a press of the reset button. The value is not all tied up in “winning” one way; it is more about the path to victory itself. Gamers are more likely to believe that “winning is everything” and “competition is the law of nature” than non-gamers (Figure 2).

Games teach players that the world is a competitive place, and standing still won’t get you anywhere. If there’s a fork in the road, take one and see what happens. Whoever you run into along the way will either be a friend or an obstacle — it’s up to you to try and figure out which one, and what effect they’ll have on you.

Finally, games teach that being the hero is important — people are counting on you to save the day and defeat that evil “level boss” waiting for you at the end of the maze. Thus, traditional leaders and top-down systems don’t earn a lot of respect from gamers, as they’ve been taught their entire lives to dispatch with those in authority as quickly as possible. Gamers correspondingly believe that they are “considered deep experts” in their companies, and believe “if something needs to be done right, they had better do it themselves” (Figure 3, next page).

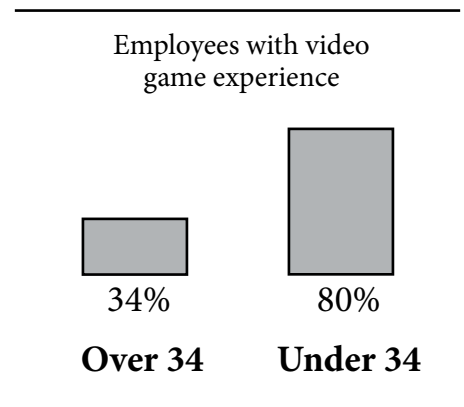


Figure 1. Age group comparison related to levels of significant video game experience

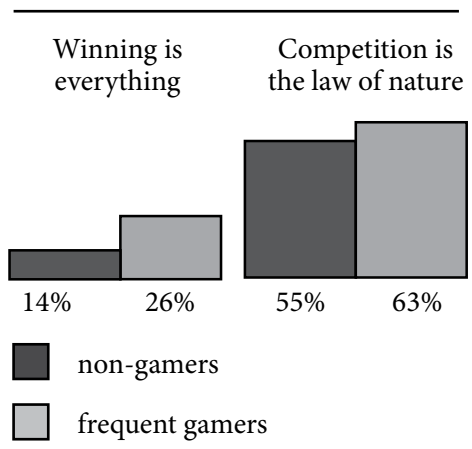


Figure 2. Comparison of Non-gamers and Frequent gamers related to attitudes on winning and competition.

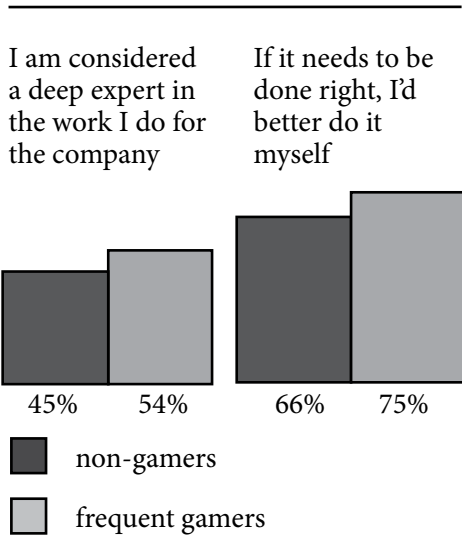


Figure 3: Comparison of non-gamers and frequent gamers related to attitudes on self-efficacy.

Of course, not all gamers feel this way — and as with many things in life, it's a matter of degree. But our research found that enough gamers had these attitudes and stood in stark contrast to those older than them who did not have the privilege of these technologies when growing up. As with any generational shift, the advantage of time belongs to the young. But for those charged with training and educating this new generation, the challenges are formidable. The same old tools just won't cut it.

The new rules of training

We think gamers are better prepared to deal with the challenges of the future than any other workforce before them because of their exposure to these new technologies. After all, corporations have been forced to become less rigid, more global, and a lot better at responding on the fly. Employees have to work harder but they also have to work smarter. But gamers have already mastered that new management model. Individual control, trial-and-error, constant change — those are all a standard part of life for these up and coming managers.

To succeed in training gamers, one must create a curriculum which:

- aggressively ignores any hint of formal instruction
- leans heavily on trial-and-error (after all, failure is nearly free, you just push “play again”)
- includes lots of learning from peers but virtually none from authority figures
- is consumed in very small bits, exactly when the learner wants, which is usually just before the skill is needed
- allows for people to take risks in a safe environment
- allows for players to achieve a skill or talent which is not only meaningful but perceived as having value

Gamers will respond positively to this curriculum because their games have conditioned them to accept these previous conditions as valid, at least compared to other forms of learning. Video games contain very few formal instructions (though there are “cheat guides” one can use for help) and allow for an infinite number of replays until the correct solution is achieved. Games allow players to trade information freely about how best to solve the puzzle — as opposed to formal tests which require each player to replicate knowledge independently. And finally, games are paced according to the player's ability or skill level — with each play, you progress a little further and can spend as much or as little time on different parts as necessary.

Gamers are much more comfortable in this sort of learning environment primarily due to their comfort level with risk. By a whopping fifteen percentage points (61% versus 46%), gamers believed “the best rewards come to those who take risks.” This comfort level with risk has been developed over a lifetime of crashing and burning, largely through games.

Gamers also strive more than non-gamers to succeed, as long as the goal has meaning to them. They say “my life could be happier than it is now” by nine percentage points more than non-gamers (68% versus 59%). Thus, gamers seem much more willing to take the steps necessary to get to the next level because they sense they are capable of more than they currently have. Gamers will respond, but only if the skill being learned is placed in a proper context — they will not learn for learning's sake alone.

Organizations need to adapt not only their training programs but many of their internal processes to give gamers new ways of learning to harvest their potential. Said one young manager, “Training would be much more effective if it was more interactive, like a game, with input and interaction with the system. I don't mind whether it's a computer or a person, it just has to be more interactive than just reading.” How are your current training tools meeting that need?

How to get the most from your gamers

To get the most from your gamers, try some of the following. Get to know some specifics of how they prefer to spend their free time. This might mean actually playing a game or two, or truly watching, really paying attention, to what your children play. By building real relationships with gamers you know professionally, you can find out more about what makes them really tick. It might even be worth it to indulge in some cultural tourism — hang out in a game store, attend a LAN party or take a GameBoy on your next road trip. But remember to look past the superficial parts of games and focus on the life lessons they impart — games are powerful metaphors for many of the conflicts and challenges we face every day at work and school.

To find the best gamer leaders, you need to develop projects specifically designed to get future leaders from the game generation working side by side with current leaders. This will allow for cross-pollination of ideas and working styles, so that each can see what the other has to offer.

Finally, you can also try to use the power of a “war game” in your organization by tackling a crisis before it happens — just to see what reactions and solutions people will come up with. You might be able to find areas you hadn’t thought about before that need a tune-up, identify the biggest potential changes that seem most likely to touch on your business or identify signposts or indicators that will tell you early on whether that change is taking place. For each area you think needs attention, spend about a half hour brainstorming what could happen, how it could threaten you, how you could exploit it.

We think the possibilities are endless when it comes to how best to train this new generation. But doing so requires acceptance of a new way of doing business, which can be hard at first. But take a look at how successful or effective traditional training styles have worked so far on this generation. In our extensive field work interviewing members of the gamer generation, we don’t hear a lot of raves out there for sitting in seats and listening to lectures — even from non-gamers. For material to be truly compelling, it must reflect the new reality of how these gamers have been formed to think.

Are you ready for the game generation?

Would you have expected all that from video games? Neither did we when we started this research. But the important qualities of the game generation will go deeper than business acumen, work ethic or competitive drive. It will be how they adapt, learn and overcome the challenges the business world will place in front of them every day. To give your organization an edge, you’re going to have to create new systems for gamers to learn and flourish. Now that you understand a little more about how gamers work and what motivates them, you should be better able to create environments for them to thrive and really get down to business — your business.

Games and gamers are known for nothing if not their exceedingly quick evolution. So it’s worth remembering that to really stay on top of this phenomenon, you’re going to have to keep up. As video games become a bigger influence on our culture, we all will need to pay attention to the ins and outs of what gamers are thinking not only today, but also tomorrow. It’s going to take some effort, but in the end, it will keep you in the game.

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