

Tim Nichols, PhD — Research Psychologist

PAID TO PLAY

It's every 10-year-old gamer's dream; one that most parents would not have believed possible. But for psychologist Tim Nichols — who works as a "user research lead" at Microsoft Studios — his dream job catapulted him far beyond virtual reality.

"When I tell people I work in video games and that I have a doctorate in research psychology, they usually wait for the punch line," he says. "But anyone with a passing interest in behavioral research knows that games represent a unique opportunity to observe, measure, analyze and interpret human behavior."

WORKING IN DISTANT GALAXIES

The psychological and scientific implications of gaming are something that many of us who grew up with Playstations, Xboxes and Wiis probably don't think about. But what is it about playing video games that makes the experience so addictive?

"A good game has people coming back for more, especially if they 'fail' the first time," says Nichols. "This is one of the most interesting research questions about video games — what is it about the game that makes us come back? What makes these systems engaging, exciting, compelling and fun? And what makes some not fun?"

These are questions that Nichols asks himself regularly while designing his research. As a behavioral researcher, he enjoys thinking about why people behave the way they do and then trying to measure that behavior. The fact that his work exists in distant galaxies among exotic creatures and ninjas is just the icing on the cake.

"Totally sweet icing," he adds.

A FIELD HEATING UP

By 2015, the video game market is expected to reach \$112 billion annually, according to the research firm Gartner. With the proliferation of games and platforms — and especially smartphones, iPads and similar mobile devices — employment opportunities for psychologists are on the rise.

"More and more companies are starting to see the value in hiring psychologists or folks with a background in psychology," says Mike Ambinder, PhD, an experimental psychologist at game design company Valve. Because the application of psychological principles to game design is so new, there is the opportunity to be a pioneer in this field.

And for those psychologists who are already part of the gaming industry, the research possibilities are vast.

"Video games offer an ever-expanding range of interaction models and user behaviors, which means I'll never run out of interesting research questions," says Nichols. "Our group is constantly developing new and better ways for answering these questions."

Because almost everyone in Microsoft's games user research group has a background in behavior research (including engineering and social and developmental psychology), their methods are grounded in experimental psychology.



Scott Squire/NonFiction Media

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