The Seven Games of Highly Effective People
How playing computer games helps you succeed in school, work and life

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"How do lions learn to hunt?"
– Chris Crawford, Game Designer

In his longtime best-seller "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," Steven Covey describes a small group of specific behaviors that people, considered to be highly effective in their work and lives, do on a regular basis.

How do people learn to do these things?

One important way people today are learning these "success habits," believe it or not, is by playing computer and video games on Windows and consoles!

Can this actually be? Can the game playing about which we hear so much criticism and negative press produce results that are not only positive, but lead to game players being "highly successful?" It can and does, with the effects already showing up in business, the professions and the military.

Let's examine just how playing games can lead to the formation of these seven "success habits" on the part of game players.

Covey divides his seven habits into two groups, with a "meta-habit" surrounding them. The first three are "individual" habits – things effective people do by themselves on a regular basis. The second three are habits that successful people use when dealing with others. The "meta-habit" is for both.

Let's first look at how computer game playing fosters the "individual" habits of highly successful people. Those habits are: "Be proactive," "Begin with the end in mind," and "First things first."

Be proactive: This is the habit of doing, rather than waiting. Any game player soon learns how important this is – you don't beat a game by waiting around for things to happen to you. You have to be there making decisions, testing strategies, defending, attacking and pulling information from the players and characters you meet. There are many Windows games that can help hone these skills. Whether you are flying a plane in *Flight Simulator*, running an historical world in *Rise of Nations* or building a theme park in the *Roller Coaster Tycoon series*, in games, as in life, the world is constantly changing. Those who don't learn to anticipate proactively don't succeed.

Begin with the end in mind: This is the habit of having a clear goal from the start. This habit gets quickly absorbed by game players, since it's pretty much impossible to succeed at any game without it. In fact, the essence of game playing is creating strategies to reach goals, and then executing them successfully. Game designers are particularly good at making the player aware of all a game's objectives, which are typically a combination of short term ("*I want to defeat this creature, or solve this puzzle*"); medium term ("*I want to complete this level*"); and long term ("*I want to beat this game*") "ends." For successful game players, beginning with these ends in mind is a *sine qua non.*

Put first things first. This is the habit of not neglecting the "important" for the "urgent." All game players quickly learn that while you are doing the immediate tasks such as arranging pieces, fighting and building, it is always necessary to be thinking about and doing tasks that support longer-term objectives. Players learn from experience that many resources that they will need later take foresight and time to develop, and that they'd better spend a good portion of their playing time preparing for the inevitable attack, twist or surprise to come. Managing both the immediate and the long-term is, in fact, the hallmark of good game playing.

Group Habits

Thus the three "individual" habits of highly successful people are clearly developed in computer game players. Now let's check the "group" habits. These are developed mainly in multiplayer games, a genre that has grown immensely in popularity over the last several years, especially on Windows. In addition to team based games, the advent of massively multiplayer games on the computer has also created many party based games requiring people to work together for a common goal.

Think Win-Win: Although the popular press often stereotypes game players as "solo killers out only for themselves," the reality of today's multiplayer gamers is quite the opposite. You can't complete a mission in *Battlefield Vietnam*, storm a castle in *Dark Age of Camelot*, defeat a "Cog Boss" in *Toontown*, or amass a fortune in *RuneScape* without a group of others whose complementary skills support the team. Known also as guilds or clans, these teams require and foster mutual support among players. While some players may still go out "solo" to hunt and destroy computer-based monsters and villains, "win-win" has become the most satisfying play strategy among human gamers.

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Seek First to Understand, Then To Be Understood: Communication between players is at the heart of today's game playing, whether through chat or voice. Successful players make sure to understand the needs and motivations of their fellow players (as well as those of potential opponents) before committing themselves to any particular team or course of action. Players who *don't* listen first and do only what they want are highly *un*successful at multiplayer games (and, of course, at life).

Synergize: To synergize is to find new combinations or strategies that make the union stronger than the sum of its parts. Today's games for Windows encourage this through their "moddable" (i.e. modifiable) architectures, which allow and encourage enormous amounts of player creation and invention, a feature not available on game consoles. Game players continually experiment, create and come together in ways that the game designers did not anticipate. Examples of "synergizing" in games include dividing up tasks, applying old tools in new ways – such as using "sticky" weapons to climb a wall – and forming unexpected alliances.

Continuous Improvement

The final habit of highly effective people is to "***Sharpen the saw***." By this Covey means working to continually improve the skills one has, and to learn new ones. No group does this better than gamers. Not only are they continually practicing and enhancing their skills by moving up the ladder of increasingly difficult levels within their games, they are continuously searching for new games, add-ons and sequels that test and improve the skills they have acquired. New add-on packages for popular series such as *Everquest* are highly anticipated for just this reason. In addition, gamers are continually on the lookout for new ideas and game-playing strategies from fellow players, magazines, and online. At the same time, the open architecture of Windows allows for continuous improvement in graphics and sound, as computer gamers eagerly await the latest video card or processor to upgrade their computers.

It Works!

Is there evidence that game playing actually makes people highly successful? Indeed there is. Among other sources, hospital studies show game players make better surgeons [1], articles highlight the military's conviction that game players make better war fighters [2], and an upcoming book, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (from the Harvard Business School Press) concludes that game players make better business people [3].

As today's computer games continue to evolve into richer, deeper, and more sophisticated experiences, the message is becoming clearer and clearer to all:

Being successful at playing today's computer games helps you succeed in life.

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Notes

1. Verena Dobnick, "Surgeons May Err Less By Playing Video Games", The Associated Press, online at
http://msnbc.msn.com/id/4685909/

2. Steve Silberman , "The War Room," *Wired*, 12.09, September 2004, online
at http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.09/warroom.html   and Clive Thompson, The Making of an X-Box Warrior, *The New York Times*, August 22, 2004, online at
http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/22/magazine/22GAMES.html

3. John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generations Is Reshaping Business Forever*. Upcoming in September 2004 from Harvard Business School Press.
See http://www.gotgamebook.com

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