



Still no evidence that exergames improve cognitive ability: A commentary on Stanmore et al. (2017)

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ABSTRACT

A recent meta-analysis (Stanmore et al. *Neurosci. Biobehav. Rev.* 78:34–43, 2017) claimed that exergames exert medium-size positive effects on people's overall cognitive function. The present article critically tests this claim. We argue that the meta-analysis reported inflated effect sizes mainly for three reasons: (a) some effect sizes were miscalculated; (b) there was an excessive amount of true heterogeneity; and (c) no publication-bias-corrected estimates were provided. We have thus recalculated the effect sizes and reanalyzed the data using a more robust approach and more sophisticated techniques. Compared to Stanmore's et al., our models show that: (a) the overall effect sizes are substantially smaller; (b) the amount of true heterogeneity, when any, is much lower; and (c) the publication-bias analyses suggest that the actual effect of exergames on overall cognitive function is slim to null. Therefore, the cognitive benefits of exergames are far from being established.

1. Introduction

A recent meta-analysis (Stanmore et al., 2017) has investigated the impact of exergames on overall cognitive ability. The meta-analysis included 17 Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) and a total of 926 participants. In most of the studies ($n = 15$), the participants were older adults (mean age > 55) with either no or some clinical condition (e.g., Parkinson's disease). The cognitive performance of the exergames-treated participants was compared to the performance of participants involved in several activities (e.g., stretching and cycling) or no activity at all. The meta-analysis reported a medium overall effect size ($\bar{g} = 0.436$), indicating that exergames may be an effective tool to improve general cognition.

However, due to methodological issues, we think that the results of this meta-analysis are substantially unreliable. First, due to mistakes in the effect-size calculation, some effect sizes are inflated. Also, it is not clear what formula is used to calculate sampling error variances. Second, the amount of true heterogeneity is quite high ($\tau^2 = 0.170$). Beyond making the results hard to interpret, such large τ^2 values inflate the overall effect size when the distribution of the effects is asymmetrical as in Stanmore et al. (2017). Third, even though Stanmore et al. (2017) include two publication-bias analyses – the rank-correlation test and

fail-safe N – neither of these methods provides an adjusted estimate of the overall effect size. In addition, the fail-safe N has been found to provide uninterpretable results (Schmidt and Hunter, 2015; pp. 531–534). Based on these issues, we present a re-analysis of Stanmore et al.'s data (2017).

2. Method

2.1. Effect size extraction

We included all the studies (RCTs) included in Stanmore et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis except one, Ackerman et al. (2010). This study investigated the effects of the Wii *Big Brain Academy* program that consists of a set of brain-training – rather than exergaming – activities. The number of included studies and independent samples was 16 ($N = 883$). We recalculated all the effect sizes and sampling error variances using the formulas provided by Schmidt and Hunter (2015).

2.2. Modeling approach

We implemented *robust variance estimation* (RVE) with hierarchical weights (Hedges et al., 2010). RVE allows one to model statistically

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dependent effect sizes and adjusts (i.e., increases) overall standard errors. Furthermore, RVE provides estimates of within-study and between-study true (i.e., not due to random error) heterogeneity components (ω^2 and τ^2 , respectively). The effect sizes extracted from one study were thus grouped into the same cluster.

We then ran publication-bias analyses. First, the statistically dependent effects were merged using Cheung and Chan's (2014) method, and a random-effect model was run. Second, we used the trim-and-fill analysis with the *LO* and *RO* estimators (Schmidt and Hunter, 2015; pp. 538-540). Finally, since trim-and-fill analysis sometimes fails to fully correct for publication bias when the null is true, we employed the PET-PEESE method as an additional technique to assess publication bias.

2.3. Sensitivity analysis

We controlled for potential outliers with influential-case analysis. The analysis individuated those studies that exerted a particularly strong influence on the model's estimates (e.g., overall effect size or true heterogeneity). We then removed the influential studies and reran the same set of analyses as described above.

We provide all the datasets, technical details, additional analyses, and R codes at the following Open Science Framework link: <https://osf.io/xgkcz/>.

3. Results

3.1. Main model

The overall effect size of the RVE model was $\bar{g} = 0.212$, 95 % CI [-0.010; 0.434], $m = 16$, $k = 75$, $p = .058$, $\omega^2 = 0.000$, $\tau^2 = 0.039$. The model thus yielded a substantially smaller effect size and between-study true heterogeneity than Stanmore et al. (2017; $\bar{g} = 0.212$ vs $\bar{g} = 0.436$; $\tau^2 = 0.039$ vs $\tau^2 = 0.170$). After merging the effects, the overall effect size of the random-effect model was $\bar{g} = 0.246$, $p = .006$, $k = 16$, $\tau^2 = 0.044$. The trim-and-fill estimates were $\bar{g} = 0.076$, $p = .445$ and $\bar{g} = 0.053$, $p = .586$ with the *LO* and *RO* estimators, respectively. The PET and PEESE estimators were, $\bar{g} = 0.002$, $p = .986$ and $\bar{g} = 0.079$, $p = .242$, respectively.

3.2. Sensitivity analysis

One influential study was detected. The overall effect size of the RVE model without this study was $\bar{g} = 0.113$, 95 % CI [-0.023; 0.248], $m = 15$, $k = 63$, $p = .084$, $\omega^2 = 0.000$, $\tau^2 = 0.000$. Excluding the influential study thus explained all the observed true heterogeneity

(from $\omega^2 = 0.000$, $\tau^2 = 0.039$ to $\omega^2 = 0.000$, $\tau^2 = 0.000$) and reduced the overall effect of approximately by a half (from $\bar{g} = 0.212$ to $\bar{g} = 0.113$). The overall effect size of the random-effect model was $\bar{g} = 0.109$, $p = .028$, $k = 15$, $\tau^2 = 0.000$. The trim-and-fill estimates were $\bar{g} = 0.066$, $p = .168$ and $\bar{g} = 0.058$, $p = .219$ with the *LO* and *RO* estimators, respectively. The PET and PEESE estimators were, $\bar{g} = -0.009$, $p = .889$ and $\bar{g} = 0.048$, $p = .331$, respectively.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present paper was to test the reliability of the findings of Stanmore et al.'s meta-analysis about the effects of exergame intervention on overall cognitive ability. Contrary to the findings of that meta-analysis, our reanalysis of the data has shown that the impact of exergaming on one's cognitive ability is very small at best and null at worst. Corrected overall effect sizes ranged from zero (PET estimates) to about 0.050-0.100 (all the other publication-bias estimates). Also, our reanalysis has yielded much more homogeneous and, hence, interpretable results. Finally, the methods used to model statistically dependent effect sizes (RVE and Cheung and Chan, 2014) do not seem to substantially affect the results (see the additional analyses). Based on the relatively small number of studies conducted at this point, our findings provide limited or even no evidence of the effectiveness of exergames on cognition. Future studies will contribute to updating the present findings.

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