

Not just playing games: ~~moving on~~ from hobbies to digital jobs

Home About On our minds **From our notes** Around the world Publications Resources



*Julian Sefton-Green shares insights from his research on young people's interest in digital technologies and how their formal and informal learning journeys helped them transformed their passions into genuine creative and digital opportunities. Julian is an independent scholar working in education and the cultural and creative industries. He is currently principal research fellow at the Department of Media & Communication, LSE, a research associate at the University of Oslo and visiting professor at **The Playful Learning Centre**, University of Helsinki, Finland.*

Children and young people will often develop intense and deep **interests around things digital** at some point in their lives. Sometimes these enthusiasms are momentary, sometimes they are persistent. Friendship groups, schools, individual teachers and families can all play a part in inspiring or inhibiting how these interests develop. When and how do such interests – usually developed out of school – shape a child's life trajectory? Can and do young people's academic experiences shackle or liberate their '**learning journeys**'?

Current attention to learning how to code and to possible job opportunities in digital industries, coupled with society's intense belief that creative computing is an important route to economic growth, led the **Nominet Trust** to turn these speculations into more organised **research**.

We interviewed around 40 young people in their late teens or early 20s, all of whom had an intense interest in forms of digital creativity, but who, at different points in the education system, had different chances to turn those interests into career pursuits. Those at university or just entering employment reflected on the twists and turns of their learning lives, explaining how key **mentors**, self-teaching skills, a supportive system and the opportunity to participate in non-formal learning had enabled them to get into paid employment, **as digital makers and creatives**.

By contrast, the teens who were interviewed, who were often still at school, tried to explain how they were mapping out their futures, thus revealing what they thought they needed to know to be able to turn their interests and hobbies into earning a living.



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A key finding was that computer game playing, often important to young people's everyday pleasures with digital media, is linked to the development of expertise, interest and a type of self-directed learning that is valued across a range of career opportunities. However, the interviewees suggested that there were very few teachers, schools or parents who understood much about games and gaming. Consequently, those who were interested in taking these interests further had had to do much of the work of finding out how to link these passions to further study by themselves, rather than relying on existing networks of teachers and career guidance.

The young people who were most able to turn their digital interests into further study or employment could all draw on well-rounded understandings of how digital industries worked, how to behave and work with other people, and what was needed to get a first step on the career ladder. This emerged in part through their self-directed learning and gaming, but also through going along to gatherings and events where they encountered like-minded peers and adults who gave them contacts and a context for understanding the spectrum of careers for digital makers and creatives.

Finally, it was striking how school – however interesting or relevant – could never be enough for these young people. They all had stories about how they had found one kind of mentor or another, sometimes from the wider family, sometimes from the school, but more often from out-of-school organisations.

What really seems to matter is that, having begun developing interests at home or among friends, digitally-creative young people should meet experts – online or offline – who can point them in the right direction and enable them to transform personal interests into genuine economic and creative opportunities.

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