



University Hospital of Wales

mmorgan@bmj.com Follow Matt on

Twitter: @dr_mattmorgan

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CRITICAL THINKING

Matt Morgan: Medicine, the never ending video game

Matt Morgan *intensive care consultant*

Sonic the Hedgehog was the first computer game I actually managed to complete. Although I may not have collected every one of the rings and I certainly died a lot while trying, I defeated Dr Robotnik in the final scene. Eventually, I felt a brief sense of achievement, but it was followed by a chasm of loss: what now? As I was 12 years old, my sense of purpose was quickly replaced by sports, riding my bike, and *Street Fighter II*.

A career in medicine can feel rather like a computer game. I used to think that it was something that needed to be completed, that the big boss could be defeated, and that the coins had to be collected along the way. I still think of medicine like a computer game, but in different, important ways.

If *Sonic the Hedgehog* had been the same on every level—with no hard bits, and no levels that made you shout or swear or think about giving up, with no big boss who felt impossible to beat—it would have been a terrible game. I would have taken the cartridge back to the shop. It was a great game precisely because it was hard and because the levels constantly changed. You had expected and hoped for exactly that.

So too now I expect a life in medicine to be like *Sonic*. A complaint will come, an exam will be failed, and I will have a terrible day. This is how it is. It is implicit in the game design. If every year were exactly the same as the one before, I would take the cartridge back.

We should still strive for better, but expecting some hard times makes the better times better. It also means that you can plan more effectively for when that tough level arrives and decide how you're going to deal with it. And you can be there for others when they get to the big boss before you do.

But the game of medicine is also much better than *Sonic*. Not because of the graphics, or the sound, or the number of rings on offer—but because it doesn't have an end. There is no big final boss to beat. You can keep playing for as long as you find it enjoyable, remembering that there are other games out there, and you can always go out to ride your bike.

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Matt Morgan is an honorary senior research fellow at Cardiff University, consultant in intensive care medicine, research and development lead in critical care at University Hospital of Wales, and an editor of *BMJ OnExamination*.