

The Real Social Benefits of Video Games

Online games can foster genuine psychological benefits and feelings of community, experts say.

Stephen Gossett

March 20, 2020 · Updated: August 20, 2020



When Ronnie Lamm appeared on a *MacNeil/Lehrer Report* segment titled “Pac-Man Perils” in 1982, she was deeply concerned about the youth of America’s burgeoning new past time: pumping “quarters upon quarters” into video games at arcades that were increasingly popping up around the country.

There were “no communicative skills being reinforced or developed” among the young people crowding around *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and the like, lamented Lamm, a Long Island PTA president whose protests against *Death Race* in 1976 had made her an early face of the video game backlash.

Lamm voiced the same concern to the *New York Times* earlier in the year, bemoaning the “antisocial behavior” being cultivated inside arcades where games were “mesmerizing our children.”

Days after the *Times* article, the paper published a [response letter](#) penned by Mitchell Robin, a Staten Island-based professor of psychology, who took issue with Lamm’s characterization of gaming as tools of alienation.

“Once the initial expense [of a home console] is incurred, the game can be enjoyed by the whole family for many years,” he wrote. “This type of entertainment can bring the family together again, and not just to sit in front of the TV set but to interact with it and with each other through competition.”

It was a thoughtful counterpoint, but nearly 40 years on, after gaming shifted from arcades to the internet, the stereotype of gamers as socially maladjusted loners persists. And when the social potential of gaming is acknowledged, it’s still brushed off as an inferior substitution to “real” human connection.

“Online games have been historically portrayed as what people in research call pseudo-communities,” said Take This research director Dr. Rachel Kowert, whose study of the effects of video games and other mediated interaction can read a bit like a decades-later logical extension of Robin’s letter.

“The value of the social connections are assumed to be somehow less than the value of the social connections that we have in face-to-face interactions,” Kowert told Built In. “But if you look at the research, that’s actually not true.”

Fortnite.
| Image:
Epic
Games

Fostering Social Connections

Along with researchers from Edge Hill University and University of York, Kowert studied more than 700 players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). The sample ranged from gamers who played as little as one hour per week to those who played 30 or more.

In findings published in 2017, the team found that MMO engagement correlated to a stronger sense of social identity, or how people self-identify based on their affiliation to groups. That social identity then corresponded with higher self-esteem and more social competence and lower levels of loneliness, the researchers found.

“It seemed to be quite a positive thing for the games we surveyed, which were all online multiplayer gamers,” said Dr. Linda Kaye, a senior lecturer in psychology at Edge Hill who specializes in cyberpsychology and co-authored the study.

It was positive both individually and in terms of a broader social connection. “Gamers often report that that common interest in itself can actually build friendships and relationships — so that common focus can be really important socially,” Kaye said.

There’s a growing body of other relevant research as well. Kowert last year edited a collection called *Video Games and Well-Being: Press Start*, in which authors incorporate a variety of academic research to explore the psychological benefits, including connectedness, of gaming. The first chapter functions as a travelogue of sorts of recent literature, including studies that showed *World of Warcraft* players expanding their social networks and evidence that social capital of the gaming variety “is positively related to higher levels of offline social support.”

“When talking about how games can be socially valuable, there is a lot of research that specifically found reductions in loneliness and depression, and that it’s particularly valuable for people who are geographically isolated — which we all are now,” Kowert said.

She continued: “Face-to-face relationships and those formed within online gaming communities both provide what we call social capital, which is an all-encompassing term for the social resources that make a friendship a friendship.”

Online, game-rooted friendships “are as real as any offline friendships,” Kowert said, “and they shouldn’t be discredited just because they’re mediated through technology.”

READY TO RUMBLE

[The Legacy of PlayStation’s DualShock Controller](#)

Animal
Crossing.
| Image:
Nintendo

Should We Still Worry About Screen Time?

It’s also worth considering that all digital interactions might not be created equal. Some screen time activities may be more fulfilling than others. “Games are unique because they’re different from online social interaction that lacks the element of a shared activity,” Kowert said.

That shared activity — the sense of a common goal or communal competition — fosters friendships in a way that, say scrolling through a newsfeed might not. “Think of it like team sports,” Kowert said. “There’s a difference between playing soccer with friends and having coffee with friends. You’re building camaraderie and close ties.”

That may be a consideration as parents struggle with whether to moderate screen time in the COVID-19 era, when things like, well, playing soccer and sharing a coffee are off the table.

Kowert’s advice? In a word: Latitude. “Parents need to give themselves more leeway,” said Kowert, who’s already more skeptical than some about how we frame screen-time concerns. “And there’s no research that has found that screens are inherently negative,” she said.

Indeed, recent research out of the Oxford Internet Institute has notably cast doubt on several longstanding video-gaming concerns, including the [notion of gaming disorder](#), the idea that violent games promote aggression and the worry that screen time diminishes well-being among young people. There is “little evidence for substantial negative associations between digital-screen engagement ... and adolescent well-being,” researchers wrote in a study published last year.

That study is not without its critics, including psychologist and *iGen* author Jean Twenge, who found [conflicting results using the same data](#). And the authors themselves admitted “we don’t understand fully the impact of big tech on our society.” They also concluded that, until tech and gaming giants make their reams of user data available for study, “we will be in the dark about the effects of these products on mental health,” while also still decrying “the moral entrepreneurs” who’ve monetized our collective digital anxieties.

But Kowert, for one, finds the research compelling, so, coupled with our new normal, it’s best to fret less, she said. “Give yourself a little bit more flexibility, not only to give yourself time for your own mental well-being, but also to leverage as an educational tool,” she said.

Also, it comes back to habits, Kaye said by way of a food analogy. “We don’t talk about eating time or food time, but there are many healthy eating behaviors and many unhealthy behaviors,” she said. “So when we talk about screen time generally, it seems a bit nonsensical to not distinguish between healthy and unhealthy.”

No one is confusing *Fortnite* with edtech, but online social games would seem to have some leg up. “Anything where you’re actively engaging, preferably with other people in a healthy way, is going to be the healthiest kind of screen time behavior,” Kaye added.

Stardew Valley.
| Image:
ConcernedApe

Recommendations for Social Gaming

Luckily, the grown folks among us can largely sidestep that debate and enjoy those boons of healthy distraction and social connectedness. (And we are; [usage is surging](#).) But are there any online games that are particularly well suited to maximize social engagement? Do any have particularly welcoming communities? And are there any platforms that don’t require hefty console investments?

Steam is one to consider, Kowert said. The online gaming platform doesn’t require a console, holds regular flash sales and includes a chat function that players can use to connect even if they’re not immersed in the same gaming universe. “You don’t have to be playing the same games together, but you still have that feeling of connection and communication,” Kowert said.

There’s always the console in your hand too. “There are many free-to-play worlds games that are also emotionally connecting, games like *Words With Friends*,” Kowert said. And racing side-scrollers are, also a good way to play with either strangers or friends, Kaye said.

As for non-mobile games, Kowert points to *Minecraft*, the beloved, all-ages sandbox bestseller, and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the just-released new entry in the popular saga. (One reviewer [likened](#) the wholesome, private-island sim to a warm blanket in troubled times.) She also recommends *Stardew Valley*, the indie-phenom farming simulator, which unveiled a co-op feature in 2018. “If you just want to play with someone who maybe lives on the other side of the city, but you can’t see right now, that’s a good option,” Kowert said. (Both *Minecraft* and *Stardew Valley* were included in the *Guardian*’s recent roundup of “25 Best Video Games to Help You Socialise While Self-Isolating,” a handy resource for our current moment.)

Exercise gaming is, of course, also in demand, as so many gyms have shuttered. Too in demand, in fact. Take *Ring Fit Adventure*, which was tough to secure even before the pandemic and is, at the moment, [officially sold out](#).

Of course, simply firing up *Fortnite* won’t instantaneously transform the withdrawn into online social butterflies. “Some players can be in social environments and still not interact much with others,” said Kaye, pointing to a 2006 research paper that explored the “alone together” phenomenon in MMOs.

But in extraordinary times, we might as well try all the help we can get. “It’s about finding alternative ways of keeping [face-to-face] connections and conversations going, and using more creative virtual ways to do so,” Kaye said.

Subscribe to Built In to get tech articles + jobs in your inbox.

Your Expertise Nearest Metro Area

Email Address SUBSCRIBE

RECENT FOUNDERS + ENTREPRENEURSHIP ARTICLES

Productive Downtime Is a Startup Leader’s Secret Weapon

Social Media Isn’t a Platform. So What Is It?

How Sports Analytics Are Used Today, by Teams and Fans

Founders + Entrepreneurship Media + Gaming

Great Companies Need Great People. **That’s Where We Come In.** [RECRUIT WITH US](#)