

Kids Will Find a Way: The Benefits of Social Video Games

Brenda K. Wiederhold, PhD, MBA, BCB, BCN

VIDEO GAMES WERE becoming increasingly popular even before the world undertook social distancing measures early last year. In 2019, there were more than 2.5 billion gamers worldwide, who combined spent \$152.1 billion on games that year—an increase of nearly 10% from 2018.¹ Still, the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has proven to be a significant boon to the industry. In the 6 days between March 16 and March 22, 2020, video game sales increased by 63% worldwide.² As the pandemic trudges on, video games are proving to be not only an enjoyable way to pass the time during lockdown, but also an essential resource for people to connect with each other.³

Video games are attractive as a social outlet not just for adults, but also for teens and children. For example, the Roblox game, a favorite among children aged 9–12 in the United States, reported an average of 31.1 million users per day during most of 2020—an increase of 82% over the year before.⁴ Gaming is one of the main ways that children and teens are socializing during this time of social distancing. Instead of the group texts and happy hour video calls popular with adults, more than half of teens prefer to catch up with friends through gaming.⁵ Much like the mall or a playground during pre-pandemic times, social games provide a virtual meeting place—somewhere that friends and acquaintances can meet to hang out and have a shared experience.

Social video games are games that involve interaction with other players rather than simply one user with their device. The play can be synchronous or asynchronous, simple or complex, console or mobile, free or monetized. The defining characteristic is that the game enables the players to communicate in some way during gameplay.

Some social video games encourage collaborative problem solving through providing specific quests or challenges, while others support open-ended play in a common environment. The socialization opportunities provided by these games are limited only by the imaginations of the users. During the pandemic especially, people have found myriad ways to re-create in-person socialization opportunities within video games, embracing the freedom of not being bound by geography or physical capabilities.

Many have found the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to be a convenient venue for virtual events. With a release date that coincided with the start of COVID-19 lockdowns, Nintendo's record-breaking Switch game that tripled the company's profits⁶ lets players freely explore a tiny tropical town, gathering and crafting items, catching insects and fish, and talking with anthropomorphic animal

neighbors. Players can visit the towns of both real-life friends and strangers who share their village code. In the past year, people have held birthday parties,⁷ gone on dates,⁸ run talk shows,⁸ and even gotten married⁹ in the game.

Beyond re-creating the socialization opportunities available in the physical world, the virtual world opens up its own unique experiences, which is especially appealing to children and teens. Young people need to play. They need to join their friends and follow their imaginations, to explore the world around them in an open-ended way. Games, especially “sandbox” games in which players are able to wander a complex world freely,¹⁰ can provide an ideal space to do this—a space that helps young people to cross the boundaries between fantasy and reality safely and creatively and, perhaps most importantly, together.

Video games, especially collaborative social video games, are popular among young people because they are often more engaging and interactive than other online activities such as streaming, video calls, or even single-player gaming. They not only provide entertainment and distraction, but also give children and adolescents a chance to learn by doing, to practice the social and emotional skills that they otherwise are not able to exercise in real life right now, leading to a sense of well-being during a time that can otherwise be isolating and frightening.¹¹

Studies have found that playing video games, especially those that are social and collaborative, can lead to more prosocial behaviors (behavior that is positive, helpful, and aimed toward social acceptance and friendship) among children.¹² The shared experiences that social games provide can result in young people who are more inclined to help one another, in both online and real-world settings.¹³ In addition, social video games can increase the player's exposure to people from different regions and cultures—an important factor in promoting the development of empathy and identity formation. This is especially crucial during a time when children and adolescents are not able to socialize in school or to travel.¹³

Today's children and teens are part of a generation that has been raised on technology. They are digital natives, used to, and most comfortable with, socializing via their devices. Phone calls and emails are not the main ways that they interact with each other; those are reserved for communication with adults. In fact, research finds that nearly a quarter of teenagers claim to give their gaming handle instead of their phone number when meeting new people, both online and in person, and nearly 80% of teens say that gaming with friends

helps them feel more connected to each other, even in pre-pandemic times.¹⁴ The digital world is the realm in which young people feel most at ease and linked to their peers.

This sense of comfort is also important for identity formation, which research suggests can, and during the pandemic may have to, take place in virtual environments.¹⁰ Games give children and adolescents a space to try out different avatars, with their different appearances, abilities, social positions, personalities, and even genders. Experimenting with these aspects in the virtual world can have fewer significant consequences than doing so in the real world.¹⁰

Of course, there is always concern about increased screen time and overuse of devices in young people. This concern is not unfounded. Just as with in-person social activities, it is always crucial for parents and guardians to supervise children and teens in the virtual world and to provide reasonable age-appropriate limits for device use. However, in the case of gaming, screen time alone is not the most important metric. Spending a significant amount of time on a specific game might not indicate a gaming “addiction,” but rather a search for social interaction during a time when opportunities for connection are scarce. To adults, it may appear that children are escaping into games and ignoring the outside world. After all, they are not engaging in the activities we tend to associate with socializing: talking on the phone, Zooming, or even texting. Yet, it is important to remember that those are not the primary ways that young people connect with each other.

Ideally, playing a video game should not replace in-person experiences. During the best of times, gaming should be an adjunct to face-to-face interaction and other modes of social interaction. Yet, during the pandemic, and in other geographically separated scenarios, social video games are providing new and exciting opportunities for connection, especially among young people.

In the end, there is not such a vast difference in social interaction between planning and creating a theme park with a buddy on Roblox and building Legos with a classmate, or visiting a friend’s town on Animal Crossing and heading over to their house for a playdate. It may not look like the type of play that current adults engaged in as children, but neither does our technology or our world. In this environment of upheaval, kids are persevering. They are continuing to play and to connect with each other, finding a way forward.

References

1. Wijman T. (2019) The global games market will generate \$152.1 billion in 2019 as the U.S. overtakes China as the biggest market. <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-generate-152-1-billion-in-2019-as-the-u-s-overtakes-china-as-the-biggest-market/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
2. Statista. (2020) Increase in video game sales during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic worldwide as of March

2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1109977/video-game-sales-covid/> (accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
3. Wiederhold BK. Violent video games: harmful trigger or harmless diversion? *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 2021; 24:1–2.
4. Richtel M. (2021) Children’s screen time has soared in the pandemic, alarming parents and researchers. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/16/health/covid-kids-tech-use.html> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
5. BBC Newsround. (2021) Lockdown: has playing video games helped you stay in touch with your friends? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/56068020/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
6. Espiner T. (2020) Covid-19: Nintendo profits triple as games boom continues. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54813841> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
7. Whalen A. (2020) People are having their birthday parties in “Animal Crossing: New Horizons” to maintain social distancing. <https://www.newsweek.com/animal-crossings-new-horizons-multiplayer-birthday-party-social-distancing-1495608> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
8. Paul K. (2020) Dating, a talk show and a dominatrix: Animal Crossing gamers explore new horizons during pandemic. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/09/animal-crossing-nintendo-game-coronavirus-pandemic> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
9. Antonelli W, Haasch P. (2020) A couple held a wedding in “Animal Crossing” after coronavirus forced them to cancel their real-world ceremony. <https://www.insider.com/animal-crossing-wedding-coronavirus-social-distancing-2020-3> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
10. Strauss E. (2020) Why now is the time to embrace video games for kids. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/27/health/video-games-socialization-pandemic-wellness/index.html> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
11. Johannes N, Vuorre M, Przybylski AK. (2021) Video game play is positively correlated with well-being. <https://royal.societypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.202049> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
12. Kovess-Masfety V, Keyes K, Hamilton A, et al. Is time spent playing video games associated with mental health, cognitive and social skills in young children? *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 2016; 51: 349–357.
13. Knorr C. (2020) How video games can help kids socialize during this isolated time. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/family/article/video-games-might-be-good-for-kids-now-coronavirus> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).
14. Lenhart A. (2015) Chapter 3: video games are key elements in friendships for many boys. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/08/06/chapter-3-video-games-are-key-elements-in-friendships-for-many-boys/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2021).

*Brenda K. Wiederhold
Editor-in-Chief*