

They laughed, they cried, they killed monsters: How friendships thrived in video games during the pandemic

Video game friendships have helped people get through a year of isolation and loneliness

By **Heather Kelly**

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For someone who is hours away from his family, living alone on a college campus without in-person classes, and who infrequently sees a friend in the flesh, Hugh-Jay Yu has an impressively active social life.

Every night between 7 p.m. and 2 a.m., the 19-year-old college sophomore in Evanston, Ill., hangs out with a group of friends on the chat and audio app Discord. There are 130 people in the group total, but usually about six to eight are logged in at any given time. Using a combination of audio channels and text chats, they play video games, have movie nights, share inside jokes, vent and laugh. The crew, which grew from people Yu met in college and others he knew in high school, now spans time zones and friend groups. He credits the games they play, from fighting in Super Smash Bros. to showing off geography knowledge in “GeoGuessr,” with helping everyone bond.

“This phenomenon of my friends meeting my other friends and becoming this close wouldn’t have happened, but for the thing ruining the rest of my life,” said Yu.

Building and maintaining friendships can be tricky in the best of non-pandemic times. Months of isolation have limited and changed how people interact with their friends and shifted many relationships online. People have found creative ways to use all types of technology to socialize. They’ve gossiped more in group chats, FaceTimed with family, joined Reddit and Facebook Groups and hosted Zoom happy hours.

New friendships have been born, while others struggled or were put on pause, unable to make the transition from in-person to virtual.

Video games especially have become a necessary tether for people to friends they aren’t able to see as much, or at all, in person. Combined with phone calls, texts and chat tools like Discord, video games — from battle royal “Fortnite” to the immersive world of “Roblox” — are giving people a way to share fun, escapist experiences with each other when their shared reality is darker. They also act as a conduit for discussing the harder topics, like depression. Whether it’s shooting aliens together in near silence or opening up about feelings of loss, playing games is serving a valuable purpose.

Friendships also help people feel that they belong, that they are part of something. People aren't supposed to be isolated, said Pennington, and they need connections. In a recent study of how people used tech to connect during the pandemic, Pennington and a team of other researchers found that not all online interactions with friends are equal. After in-person interactions, phone calls were the best at decreasing anxiety. Zoom calls actually increased stress, perhaps because of the energy it requires to see and be seen on video.

People who played more video games online also reported higher levels of stress, though Pennington said they didn't specify what games were being played or if they were doing it in combination with other communication tools.

Video games have long been social, even when it was just people playing side-by-side on the same sofa. A 2017 [Washington Post-University of Massachusetts Lowell poll](#) found that while 80 percent of people said they played video games purely for entertainment and fun, more than half said it was a way of enjoying time with their friends. The addition of apps like Discord, which started as a place for gamers to gather and communicate better while playing, makes socializing even easier.

Video games are not a niche hobby. They're popular across age groups and genders — 52 percent of regular gamers were men and 48 percent were women, according to a 2017 Pew survey. Video games can be played on dedicated consoles, PCs or smartphones, and many popular titles allow people to play friends or strangers online. It's big business, too — the video game industry revenue was an estimated \$180 billion in 2020, according to research firm IDC.

None of the players we spoke with are using games as their only connection to other people. They're knitting them together with other forms of communications, from social media to phone calls, and regularly switching between the tools.

College freshman Maddie James uses video games, a group text, and a private "cozy" Discord server to hang out with her close friends, but says they abandoned Zoom early on. Multiple nights a week, they'll play "Animal Crossing" and "Legend of Zelda," craft together, watch movies and run virtual "Dungeons & Dragons" campaigns. But lately they've been united on a special "very weird" group project on their Minecraft server: they're digging a massive pit below a Burger King they built, and are turning it into a trading hall for villagers as well as temporary monster storage.

James still lives in her hometown of Athens, Ohio, but not all of her high school friends made the leap to socializing through games. For some, communicating online didn't have the same impact and they weren't interested in putting in the time to keep those connections. But for her core group of friends with a long history of nurturing friendships over the Internet, it was an easy transition.

"We're all comfortable online, we all have experience interacting that way," she said. "I have noticed the difference between people who value online friendships as much as in-person ones and people who don't."

Maintaining friendships is work, and people only have the capacity for a small number of close friendships at a time. Simply liking someone's social media posts is not usually enough effort or interaction. A friendship requires a commitment to the other person, and that means you keep showing up, even online, says Jeffrey Hall, a

communications professor at the University of Kansas who runs its Relationship and Technology Lab. It's much easier

“[Gaming] was a growing way people were keeping in touch before the pandemic, and the pandemic was fertile soil for it to keep growing more,” said Hall, who also worked on the study. “For the sake of spending time together and hanging out, there probably is no better way to do it.”

Playing games isn't just trivial. Play in general and being open to doing fun things together is an essential part of a friendship. And taking part in those types of activities can help friends talk about and process more important issues, from politics to their mental health.

For years, Andrew Alcott and a group of his close friends regularly got together after work to unwind with a beer and sometimes kick around a soccer ball. Only these days the group is down to four core people, the ball is virtual in their ongoing “FIFA 21” Xbox soccer game, and the beers are seen over their FaceTime calls. The friends met while working at the same company in Los Angeles where they would also play video games, but during the pandemic Alcott, 30, temporarily moved to Seattle and another friend moved to London. The year has brought them closer together and they text each other daily, share clips of the previous night's plays, and work through everything going on in the world outside their doors, from the killing of George Floyd to the presidential election.

“It's been unbelievably helpful for my mental health. We've talked about this at length: we don't actually know what would have happened if we didn't have this outlet,” said Alcott. “I've had some pretty lonely days myself, it can be tough. I can't imagine what people are doing without some outlet.”

Mental health issues have been especially worrisome for teens and children, who are less used to being isolated socially than older adults, according to Pennington. For teens this age is a critical time for developing friendships. A [Common Sense Media survey](#) from March found that 38 percent of people between ages 14 and 22 reported moderate or severe symptoms of depression, an increase from 25 percent two years before. That amount jumps to half of teens and young adults when a family member has been diagnosed with covid.

With the right safeguards, games are being used by young children who are out of school and missing out on their normal social interactions. Some are still too young to own their own phones, or even type, but can “spend time” with friends in a kid-friendly game like “Roblox” or “Minecraft.”

Izaro Lopez Garcia's fifth-grader, Maya, plays games with her friends for a couple of hours on the weekends. She lives in the United Kingdom and has friends in Japan, but they manage to socialize through “Roblox,” “Minecraft” and “Among Us.” Her father says that with guidance, they're able to use tech to keep her connected to friends and family while still keeping her screen use in check.

The year has felt especially long for children, and many have struggled to stay engaged with friends they can't see.

When schools first closed down, Elissa Katz installed Facebook Messenger Kids, the company's chat app for people under 13, on her children's iPads. The app includes silly games and was a hit for a while. But as the months have worn on, the kids have stopped communicating on Messenger as much. Her 7-year-old daughter has lost interest in chatting with people, and her 9-year-old son is mostly on “Minecraft.”

“It’s not going to disappear just because sometime in the next 12 to 24 months we’ll all be vaccinated. Those gamers who used to play will continue to play in a post-pandemic society, maybe they’ll meet up with new people they met online,” says Hannah Marston, a research fellow at the [Health & Wellbeing Strategic Research Area](#) at Open University in Britain who has studied gaming during the pandemic.

Moshe Isaacian is looking forward to meeting some of the friends he’s made through games in person. The 27-year-old had just moved to Portland, Ore., when the pandemic started, and says he was dependent on daily online gaming — and the seven Discord servers he frequents — to feel less alone. He’s managed to make new friends around the world, meeting up online from their various time zones.

“It’s a community of people that I can count on to be there, to just destress with and have a good day,” said Isaacian. “It’s kind of like a live therapy session.”

He’s already talked to a few people he thinks he’ll definitely be able to hang out with this year in real life. Maybe they’ll have an old fashioned LAN party night, he said, where everyone gets together and plays video games on their own computers in the same location.

Not everyone prefers real-world interactions over online socializing. Kathryn Morris absolutely misses seeing her best friend of nine years in person, but they found a rhythm online while isolated. Morris, 20, has a Discord server where they hang out with a group of online friends. She affectionately calls it their “little corner of chaos.” Morris started out playing games like “Pokémon” and “Minecraft,” but now she and the group mostly share jokes, life updates and memes, or play a role-playing game that they make up on the spot. The past year has been hard, but she’s found a comfort level online that wasn’t always easy to come by in real life.

“Being able to communicate from behind a screen allows me to use my online persona — Alexis — as a mask. It makes me feel safer, or even a bit stronger than if it was just me in front of someone I didn’t know,” said Morris. “Being online allows me to be anonymous, whereas being physically present doesn’t.”

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