

Looking For Group: Exploring How Youth Build Peer Relationships in Online Gaming
Communities

By

Gabriel Gulley

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Abstract

“Hey! Listen!” - Navi, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

This research will lay the foundation for future research to help understand how youth form peer relationships in various online gaming communities. This research was conducted by completing a thematic content analysis of five YouTube videos from five different online gaming communities, aiming to identify any activities or experiences are important for meeting and making friends in online gaming spaces. This research found that there are several thematic activities or experiences that are important when meeting new people in their respective online gaming spaces. These included what a player should and should not do to form and keep peer relationships with others met online as well as potential experiences that should be had to help them grow. These experiences and activities fall under several different themes. A few of these themes are “Be Kind”, “Share”, “Be Social/Participate”, as well as several others. This research finds that there are overarching themes for youth making friends in online gaming communities from the videos analyzed. While many of the themes identified do cross the gaming communities studied in this thesis, much more research needs to be done before any definitive patterns or differences can be confirmed for online gaming communities as a whole.

Acknowledgements

“Press (F) to pay respect...” - Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge my wife and two children who, while we all have very different tastes in games, made my love of video gaming their own and made gaming a central part of our family bonding and dynamic. Whether it is exploring the zoo she built in Minecraft with my daughter, getting the Dub in a No Build with my son in Fortnite, hours of slicing musical blocks with my wife in Beat Saber, or all four of us knocking each other over while fighting in Arms or trying to “Just Dance”, there are always laughs to be had and memories to be made together as a family thanks to the time we spend playing together.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Stay a while and Listen” - Dekard Cain, Diablo 2

There were times in my childhood when I truly felt alone. Turbulent younger years filled with divorce, apartment leases, and parental custody agreements meant moving around often. I never formed those "lifelong bonds of friendship" with those elementary school classmates. After my parents' divorce and my mother's remarriage, in grade five, we moved from an impoverished town to the middle of the affluent suburbs. I was the poor kid, and these upper-middle-class classmates had been together for years. I did what many late Gen Xers (or early Gen Y, depending on the graph you find) did and started finding my past time filled with video games. Unlike today, you were not cool for locking yourself in your room for hours and trying to beat the latest release. There was no online connectivity on the Atari, Nintendo Entertainment System, or Game Boy. It was still just as easy as it is today to get lost in a fantasy world, trying to save a princess that is almost always in another castle or beat a high score in a Russian puzzle game that is taking the world by storm. However, the significant difference from today is that, unless you were very, very wealthy, which we were not, you did it without the internet. You did it alone or with a friend you already made on the "Player 2" controller in person.

Most gamers my age remember their first "online" experience. For me, it was Pokémon. These games were novel because they were released in pairs, this "Generation" being Pokémon Red and Blue in 1998. The point of the game was to complete your "Pokedex" (Pokémon Index) by collecting all the Pokémon. There were 151 Pokémon in "Generation 1," but neither game had the complete roster. If you bought a special Link Cable, you could connect your Game Boy to someone else's Game Boy, and it allowed you to trade Pokémon between games.

This is when I met Steven. I knew him only because we had the same High School lunch period. We were both loners who usually sat by ourselves and read books through lunch. We were both secret gamers. One day, we noticed the other person sitting at our respective lunch tables, playing Pokémon. We were both playing Pokémon Blue, so I never said anything to him until one day he approached me asking to trade. What I frustratingly did not know was that there was a game mechanic that, to evolve four specific Pokémon, you had to trade them with someone else. I agreed, and he pulled out his trading cable. We proceeded to sit there for that lunch period together, our Game Boys attached by a grey cable and traded Pokémon, outwardly nerding out over every evolution, not minding the occasional "dorks" or "nerds" comments from random passersby. We finished up as the bell rang, and he asked me if I wanted to trade some more tomorrow. I half-heartedly agreed, saying that I did not have anything else to trade, and I already had all the Pokémon in Blue. That is when he pulled out his copy of Pokémon Red. He had all the Pokémon he could get on both games, but could not finish either because he needed a trading partner to get them all on one game. We had both made our first "online" gaming friend. Through the rest of our junior year lunches, we sat there, linked through the cable, and would trade and battle Pokémon. When Pokémon Yellow came out in 1999, we spent our senior year lunches much the same way, trading and battling and just having fun.

We graduated from high school and attended different colleges, but we lost touch because, back then, before Facebook or MySpace, it was tough to stay in touch online. Stevens Pokémon made the journey into Generation Two, where they still sit, as part of my completed Pokedex. That was not the end of our friendship, however. Several years later, I did end up finding him online, and we reconnected. He was not much into gaming anymore, but was still an avid Pokémon player, as was I. Because of technological upgrades, players can now do trades

from anywhere in the world. While we do even live in the same parts of the world anymore, being part of the online Pokémon community has kept us connected. While trading to complete a single game's Pokedex is as easy as dropping a Pokémon in the online trading system and waiting for some other anonymous player to trade with you, Steven and I still take time every game generation to connect online and do personal trades. At this point, both of our kids have Pokémon with the other's username as the Original Trainer. He is not my only friend like this.

While Steven started as a high school friend who transitioned to an online friend, I have a group of friends who are almost just as old and just as trusted, if not more, than him. In 2001, I found myself drawn into my very first Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, otherwise known as an MMORPG, Final Fantasy XI. I had plenty of "real life" friends in college who were also gamers that played online games together, so playing online was not a new experience. This was my first time playing with a group of people from all over the world, and I knew nothing about them. After a few failed attempts in Linkshells (the in-game name for a group of players who form a group to play together), I filled a team slot on a mission with a few members of the Linkshell Great Big Sea. I was competent and reliable enough to be invited into their Linkshell. They were my first group of true online friends. As time moved on and technology advanced, we created online voice and video chat groups on other applications so that we could voice and video chat with each other while playing in-game. What started as playing here and there with each other online turned into Friday and Saturday night Discord gaming marathons that would sometimes run ten plus hours, while we drank, joked, and played together in-game. The more we got to know each other, the more important we became to each other outside the game. Gifts and cards were exchanged on birthdays and other special occasions, and online parties were often hosted for each other when in-person family gatherings were over.

We were there for each other, not only for the good times, but more importantly, through the bad. We have been there for each other through breakups, losses of family members, divorces, and worse. Even though many of us have moved on from Final Fantasy XI, our Linkshell has a Facebook Messenger group chat going back over a decade, filled with daily chats about everything from stupid jokes and memes to trip and marriage plans, birth announcements, and anything else you can think of that friends would talk about.

Vacation plans are sometimes the most fun to talk about because many of us have planned vacations around the chance to meet up. Given that we have spent so much time online together, it is not even that strange to see each other in person. I have met up with several of my Linkshell friends while travelling over the years, and they are some of the most memorable and fun times of my life. The goodbyes are even less sad because they usually end with something along the lines of, "Ok, see you this [pick a day] and we can hang out online." One Linkshell member even helped my family and me come to Canada and now lives just ten minutes away from us.

These are just a couple of examples. Through the various games I have played over the years, I have formed ongoing friendships with people from different communities. Some of them cross over between groups, and others do not. Some of us only play competitive games, like Fortnite or Marvel Heroes, while others are strictly cooperative gamers who prefer games like Minecraft. Most of us do not mind what game we play as long as we are playing something together.

My story and background with online gaming communities are not unique. Given the record number of youth online, there is a significant lack of research on how peer relationships are formed within online gaming communities. Unlike when I was young, and connectivity was

scarce, an increasing number of youths around the world are growing up being able to connect online. Whether it be through phones, tablets, smart devices, personal computers and laptops, or gaming consoles, more and more youth are finding themselves connecting online for learning, playing, and socializing (Saleh, 2024). I have two children of my own, ages 11 and 13, who have grown up connected online. Through other parents who are online friends of mine, we have even created our own online community where our kids have become online friends and play together.

Extensive research has been conducted on the effects of social media and constant connectivity on the lives of youth (Anderson & Jiang, 2022). Within that research, a significant portion focuses on the negative types of relationships that can occur in online spaces and the adverse effects they can have on youth. My research on this topic began back in March of 2023. An unrestricted search done at that point in the MSVU NovaNet database for “peer relationships” and “online gaming” returned only 12 results. Google Scholar showed more with 1,950 results, and this was without even adding the “positive” search criteria. This search was repeated on August 24th, 2025 with roughly the same results. Searches for topics like cyber bullying (272,00 results) (Nicol, 2012), cyber stalking (45,700 results), cyber trolling (29,100 results), cyber aggression (195,000 results) (Koster et al., 2009; Lapierre & Dane, 2022, Levy & Sela-shayovitz, 2020; Moore et al., 2012), and doom scrolling (18,400 results) and their connection to depression (Buckels & Paulhus, 2014), suicide (Schock, 2025), addiction (Barzikowsky & Bernhardt, 2018; Choliz, 2016; Gainsbury, 2015; Johnson & Edwards, 2020; Jorge & Sibia, 2019; Karako et al., 2020; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011)), and other mental health problems (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Kardefelt-winther, 2015; Wilson & Seigfried-Spellar, 2022) have a large database of research compiled from being studied. To add to research done on negative aspects covering are studies done on criminal issues like kidnapping and trafficking of

children. This is also found within the subject of misinformation online and how it is being used to guide youth into extremist ideologies (Jakubowicz, 2017). With this wealth of knowledge of the negative repercussions of youth being online, comparatively less research has been conducted on the positive impacts that peer relationships may have on these youth, especially when it comes to gaming communities.

Given the comparative lack of research in this area, I was unable to locate any studies examining how positive peer relationships develop within these communities. Consequently, I will conduct a thematic content analysis of YouTube videos featuring gamers from various gaming communities talking about their experiences online to identify any emerging themes and understand how youth interact with other games and what actions or experiences help form peer relationships. As most gaming communities are mixed-aged groups (Armstrong, 2025), I will be focusing on youth gamers between the ages of 13 and 24

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“You must construct additional pylons.” - Narrator, Starcraft

Peer Relationships and Interactions

While there are many different types of online games. Two of the main types of interactions that take place within the online gaming spaces are cooperative and competitive. Cooperative gaming is where players join up online and work together to complete a goal or mission (Wrobel, 2023). Some examples of this are high-level boss or dungeon raiding in World of Warcraft to collect end-game loot or working with a team of investigators to find the type of apparition you are dealing with in Phasmophobia. Entire communities are built around teamwork, play, and working toward goals together with a team, guild, squad, or whatever it is named in each game (Clement, 2024).

On the other side, there are competitive communities for online gaming. These games are designed so that players compete against each other, and a player or team wins by defeating other players, completing an objective first, or being the last person alive in a match or game (Griffiths et al., 2015). Some examples of these are Battle Royal games like Fortnite where 100 players are dropped into a game and the last one surviving wins, Super Smash Brothers or Street Fighter where players play one versus one to defeat the other player in an online fight, League of Legends where one player is made to take over a map before the other, or any one of the many sports titles put out every year.

While these are the two general types of gaming interactions, the communities formed around these games often end up being a hybrid. While games often focus on one end of the gaming spectrum, they often have mixed objectives, leading to a diverse community. For example, Overwatch 2 is a player-versus-player game that requires teams of five or six players to

play as a team (*Overwatch 2*, n.d.). As a result, groups will form and play regularly together against other regular groups. While Fortnite's largest game mode is one vs 100 Battle Royale gameplay, a player can choose to join groups of two to four players and play as a team. There is also a cooperative gameplay mode with stories and missions where four players work together (Harrison, 2024). World of Warcraft clans can have hundreds of individual members with specific jobs working together as a team to complete end-game content, but sometimes they will work together to raid other clans for in-game loot or quests. So, while they may vary depending on the community, one key aspect of online gaming is the relationships that are formed between players through shared gameplay experiences.

One primary relationship-building tool of video game communities is that gaming together tends to be active, as in the users are generally doing something together, versus passive, where users tend only to look or listen to things. The research by Mao and Zhang (2023) defines active usage as actively engaging with the media while, passive usage being non-active usage such as browsing or observing. The main difference between the two is that the usage either generates changes or does not generate changes and is used in this research because it gives the most direct and easily understandable differences between the two types of interactions. Examples would be browsing the front page of Reddit.com (passive) versus four players getting together online to practice new strategies for an upcoming tournament on Call of Duty (active). Video games, as an active medium, provide a foundation for players to form relationships due to the social aspects built into many games from the start. Most games require player interaction. Through these interactions, it can be entirely natural for relationships to form between players.

Many in-person relationships start with people having common interests. Groups form around books (book clubs), sports teams (fan clubs), and countless other real-life interests, and it

is no different for online communities as well. Often, real-life interest groups will take their clubs online and find others with similar interests to their own. One main difference between these in-person groups and online communities is that online communities are often anonymous. Users often do not use real names, preferring to use "gamer tags". These are in-game names used in place of real names. To maintain anonymity, sensitive information such as age, sex, gender, race, location, abilities, and other identifying details is intentionally omitted. As a result, online relationships can evolve differently over time compared to in-person relationships.

Reasons for staying anonymous vary from player to player, but personal safety tends to be the largest area of concern. Many of the safety concerns come from parental concern for their children's safety. Boyd and Hargittai (2013) found that these concerns fell into three major categories: Fear of physical harm (sexual victimization, grooming, etc.), fear of psychological harm (exposure to sexual/violent material, cyberbullying, cyber-trolling, addiction, etc.), and fear of illegal activity (media piracy, underage gambling, etc.). Children are often taught early not to give personal information online to keep themselves safe. This has shaped the way companies have developed their terms of service for users and federal law. The Terms of Service for many major social media and gaming community sites and applications, such as Reddit.com, YouTube.com (YouTube, n.d), Facebook.com (and its parent company Meta) (*Meta terms of Service*. Facebook, n.d.), Twitch.com (*Welcome to Twitch Legal*. Twitch.tv, n.d.), and Discord (*Terms of Service*. Discord, n.d.), prohibit users under the age of 13. All mentioned sites and applications promise an instant removal for anyone under 13. This is not an arbitrary number. The Federal Trade Commission set the age of 13 as the cutoff for websites to be able to collect information from their users by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule, or "COPPA," in 1998 (*Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule ("coppa")*, 2023). In 2022, there were an

estimated 2.95 billion gamers worldwide (Gilbert, 2023). With that many players, only an estimated 20% of them are under 18 years old (Howarth, 2023). This 13-year age cutoff still leaves much room for players of mixed ages to be playing together and not knowing it.

The safety concerns are not unfounded, and negative relationships can also form. As cited above, the negative side of online interactions has been studied. Grigg (2010) was able to find a long list of negative interactions, including, but not limited to, harassment, abusive messages, hacking, spreading rumours, obscene phone calls, stalking, and threats. Some forms of online harassment, like cyberbullying or cyber trolling (Nicol, 2012), are so prevalent that they have been given their own terms. Grievers will join a game just to intentionally ruin other games for no other reason than their potential enjoyment (Acterbosch et al., 2017). Flaming is the act of purposefully posting something abusive or inflammatory (Gillespie, 2006), while doxing strips a user of their anonymity by publishing otherwise personal information about a person online without their consent (Lee, 2020). These, among a myriad of other attacks, are carried out by trolls who are users who exploit the anonymity of the internet to antagonize others by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or content to disrupt others (Lapierre & Dane, 2022; Merriam-Webster, n.d; Mladenovic et al., 2021). With such readily available access to online spaces, social media addiction has become a significant concern as well. It can manifest in constant web surfing or addiction to online relationships (Young, 1999), in information addiction (Rajeshwari & Meenakshi, 2023), with many of these addictions being fed by the "Fear of Missing Out", otherwise known as "FOMO" (Tang et al., 2020, p. 3). The adverse effects of these negative online activities have been linked to increased thoughts of suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Baier et al., 2018), and even becoming cyberbullies themselves (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2020).

There are positive impacts of online interaction. Fishman (2023) describes many ways online spaces can be positive, supportive places to socialize for people with social anxiety. Some examples from Fishman's (2023) research include those on the spectrum or with social anxiety issues, talking with others does not require eye contact, reading body language, personal space issues, or environmental distractions. For those with body-related or self-esteem issues, in-game avatars let them change their appearance to be whoever or whatever they desire (Cid from VRChat, 2022). For those in social deserts, it allows for meeting people who share similar interests but may not live nearby.

Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) even concluded that if digital screen use fell within specific parameters for adolescents, not only was it not harmful to their overall well-being, but it may be beneficial for their overall mental health. Teens self-reported that they felt more connected to their friends, that they interacted with a more diverse group of people, and they had people to support them in tough times just by keeping up with their friends online (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). While recently, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, more research has been done about digital connections, play and its importance in youth's lives today (Cowan & Potter, 2021; Cowan et al., 2021; Kourti et al., 2021), it is these kinds of effects that need to be studied more in the world of online gaming communities.

Third Places

To better understand peer relationships and their development, it is essential to have a deeper understanding of the places in which they occur and how these places have evolved. Oldenburg (1989) defines a "third place" as somewhere that a person spends time outside of their home (first place) and work or school (second place). These are usually places where people can go to exchange ideas, have a good time, relax, and build relationships. In generations past, "third

places" included locations like churches, bars, malls, or the homes of friends. Traditionally, for youth, third places have differed from third places that adults frequent. They included places like playgrounds, malls, movie theatres, community centers, libraries, and skateparks. For the youth of today, there has been a dramatic shift (*Children's media lives 2023*. Ofcom, 2024). The number of traditional third places youth go to are on the decline (Levin, 2022; Oldenburg, 1996; Oldenburg, 2014) With the rise of technology, we have witnessed a shift in third places for youth. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic caused a reorganization of the world by forcing everyone inside, with digital communication being the central place to engage with others (Cowan et al., 2021). Generation Y and beyond have grown up with online connectivity, making it a staple for how youth engage with others via text, social media, and online gaming. Youth are escaping to hang out with their friends online and making new virtual communities. Online gaming has become a third place for youth to connect and share with friends.

The shift away from thinking that a third place must be physical is an idea that has been challenged in many ways. Before there were technological third places, there were theoretical literature third places. Webb (2016) and Bates (2016) both argue that children's literature can be a third place for children. Bates (2016) takes a clinician's approach and argues that children's literature can help create a shared third place for patients and caretakers to help physicians or health professionals connect with their patients. Charon (2006) similarly describes how stories can create therapeutic places for youth and how those places can be used to create a connection between the patient and caregiver.

As with children's literature being used to connect and share ideas with children, many schools have integrated virtual places for students to connect, learn, and play. English as a Foreign Language learners at a university in Taiwan set up telecollaborative third places to help

with English proficiency. Students would log online and engage in language and cultural exchanges with peers in Australia and New Zealand. From this, 91% of students reported that online telecommunications significantly improved their confidence in English communications and helped with their language proficiency (Yeh & Heng, 2022). These students were using an online place to connect, share ideas, and create relationships to further their learning. This is a prime example of an online place being a third place used, in this case, for learning. Recreations would be another perfectly acceptable use for an online third place as well.

By using these previously stated understandings of third places, Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero's (2020) have already expanded 2019 definition of Ludology that we could include online video game spaces as a third place for youth. Online gaming spaces, and the social elements included within them, would be acceptable places for youth to exchange ideas, have a good time, relax, and build relationships and therefore would fit within Oldenburg's (1989) original "third place" definition. Yeh and Heng (2022) have already demonstrated that connecting students from around the world can benefit various aspects, including ESL, through communication and cultural exchange. Furthermore, Bates (2016), Webb (2016), and Charon (2006) argue that narratives can be a viable third place for youth. Video games, both online and offline, are often story-driven. Whether that be in building a large online world with millions of other players or a cooperative game with a small group of online friends, the progression through a shared online gaming story is what draws them together and keeps them coming back to interact. All these reasons make online gaming communities viable and important third places for millions of youths every day. In this study, I aim to examine the formation of peer relationships that youth create when engaged in online gaming spaces as third places.

Educational Online Gaming Communities

With the broadening of the definition of a "third place" to include online spaces, more research needs to be done to have a comprehensive understanding of where these spaces are and how they operate. With the widespread integration of the internet in the mid-1980s and the introduction of smartphones in the 1990s, youth today have grown up in a world with online connectivity. In 2018, 95% of teens self-reported owning or having access to a smartphone, with 45% of them stating they are online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). From online discussion boards and personal chat programs to dating and connectivity phone applications, people have been creating places to connect online.

Even before the widespread public acceptance, gaming has been one area that embraced online connectivity ahead of others. In 1975, the text-based multi-user dungeon (MUD) game *Adventure* connected many players online to work together or battle each other in a text-based virtual world (Bartel, n.d.). While often ostracized and shunned at first, today, these online communities have become widely accepted and used.

Yeh and Heng (2022) studied ESL learning for adults, but online gaming is already being used in early childhood and elementary education (Hidayati & Pardjono, 2018; Lim & Wang, 2005; Nwogu, 2019; Young et al., 2012; The math-based Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *Prodigy* is being used in elementary schools around the world to help students connect online and solve math-based puzzles with each other while raising pets, collecting new gear, and levelling up with an estimated 150 million students in 150 different countries (ProdigyGame.com, 2021). While the basis of the game is to help children learn math, the use of online space and interactions within the game makes it a social space as well. Children at school will discuss their game experiences in the classroom and arrange online playtimes with each other after school, providing another way for them to stay connected.

Many online video games are set up to host those online interactions as a basic function of their playability and, in turn, have become social spaces of their own. Text chat within games is what the earliest online games were built on (Bartel, n.d.). While voice chat within video games did not become very common until the late 1990s (Krane, 2017), outside programs like Teamspeak or Ventrilo were often used on personal computers to supplement the lack of integration. In-game voice chat is now a standard function of most current online games and is often seen as mandatory for many online games if there is a competitive and/or team-play aspect (TheProfessional, 2019). Finally, while video chat is very rare within games, third-party applications like Discord are often used to join up with online friends, share screens and cameras, and have virtual "game parties" to play together.

While the addition of these socially interactive tools helps make these communities a third place for many youths, those interactions can manifest in various ways. Some games promote active participation, while others are still viable with just passive interactions between players. Some games are cooperative, requiring players to work together to succeed or meet goals, while others are competitive, matching players against each other to determine the winner. While these communities may form, evolve, and interact differently, overall, they start as anonymous people of all ages coming together and forming relationships over the shared love of an online game and the spaces that come along with it.

Question

How do youth form peer relationships in online gaming spaces?

This study will conduct a thematic analysis of five YouTube videos featuring the friendship-making experiences of online gamers from five different gaming communities to

examine the themes that those gamers believe are important in creating peer relationships within online gaming spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Neo-ecological Theory

“Wisdom is the offspring of suffering and time.” - Izaro, Path of Exile

The theoretical framework guiding this study is a proposed adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory by Navarro and Tudge (2023). In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original bioecological systems theory, he explains that an individual's development is not only influenced by the interactions between themselves and different environments and people in their lives (i.e. home, school, family, friends, etc.) but also by how those different parts and people interact with each other. Navarro and Tudge (2023) took the original theory and adapted it to include the technological and virtual places that were not present when the original theory was proposed. With youth growing up in the digital age and the fact that technology is now part of their everyday lives, there are no longer clear-cut boundaries between online and physical spaces. Navarro and Tudge have made two major changes to Bronfenbrenner's original theory. First, while there is some overlap between and much interaction between the two, there are two systems: physical and virtual (Navarro and Tudge, 2023). Second, through technology, the effects of and changes in macro and exosystems can have a much larger effect on the systems below them because of the interconnectivity of all systems through technology (Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

With the inclusion of virtual places in the ecological systems theory, I aim to demonstrate that the interaction of youth within their virtual gaming spaces within their microsystem facilitates the formation of peer relationships. The purpose of this research is to explain possible ways in which that happens.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Protocol one: link to pilot. Protocol two: uphold the mission. Protocol three: Protect the pilot.”

- BT-7274, Titanfall 2

While there are several ways this research could have been done, for this research, a Phenomenological Study, a qualitative research method that tries to understand a person's lived experiences and the meanings the person attaches to them (McLeod, 2024), would be the most appropriate. Studies, such as this, have been found to be appropriate for areas where there is little previous knowledge on why something happens (Donalek, 2004).

For this research, I will be using inductive thematic content analysis to study how youth, between the ages 13 and 24, meet and form peer relationships while playing together in online games. To achieve this, I will be analyzing five YouTube videos from five different online games to explore how those participating in those communities meet and socialize while playing together. Through these videos, I will be looking for any themes describing how individual gamers meet online and how those themes affect any continued peer relationship. The reason a thematic content analysis was chosen for this research was because, since a phenomenological research study basis was chosen as the overall research method, i.e. trying to find the meanings that are placed on individuals' experiences and how they affect friendship making in their various online gaming communities, I decided that by comparing and contrasting themes that the five YouTube content creators on making friends would be the best possible way to set groundwork for further study in this area.

As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic content analysis is a qualitative research method used for “Identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.

79). While thematic content analysis has been widely used, the fact that it wasn't strictly defined for quite a while made it less appreciated by the research community compared to other, more well-defined methods of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To help raise the level of legitimacy of thematic content analysis as a research and analysis method, Nowell et al. (2017) applied Lincoln and Guba's 1985 concept of trustworthiness to thematic content analysis. Through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all through the use of audit trails (detailed, step-by-step record keeping) helped to take thematic content analysis from an analytical ideology to a more concrete analytical methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Themes, within thematic content analysis, are ideas or experiences that, alone, may mean nothing but when put together with other experiences or ideas, start to form patterns (Mishra & Day, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). There are two ways to look for themes in data and that is through either inductive or deductive analysis. While both are valid ways of analysis, they are done completely differently and for varying reasons. With inductive thematic content analysis, researchers use data to generate the themes and codes they then report on (Clark, et al., 2022). Indicative analysis would be used more in exploratory or developmental research when looking for information to form theories or learn about new ideas. In deductive thematic analysis, a researcher would use the data they compile to either confirm or deny a hypothesis brought forth by a theory (Clark, et al., 2022). This type of thematic content analysis would be used to help confirm, deny, strengthen, or weaken already established theories or ideas.

Thematic content analysis is not the only appropriate type of phenomenological study that would have been appropriate for research such as this. Doing a case study of the experiences of single gamer would have been appropriate as well. The introduction of this thesis could be

considered an example of a case study of my experiences growing up and connecting in virtual gaming spaces with others. Each case is individual to each person and, while valid, does not lend itself to being generalized to a population. Williams (2000) argues that case studies are useful in theory generation and testing, they lack the ability to be generalized upon. While what I, or any other gamer, goes through is valid and can be used as a point of reference by researchers, for the ability to do some generalizing for the community, the decision to use multiple but less in-depth experiences was made. The five videos chosen for this research have enough explanation of actions, experiences, and follow-up information that they will be used instead of in person interviews about how the gamers were able to make friends online.

Data Collection

“Get over here!” - Scorpion, Mortal Kombat Series

All videos chosen for final analysis for this research are being used in lieu of personal interviews (Bu, 2021). The video collection and selection criteria are to follow but all final videos give enough personal experiences, in-depth discussion about online interactions had, and why the creators suggest what they suggest that they go beyond a simple “hack” or “list” video that their video titles suggest.

For this research, data is drawn from YouTube videos published between 2019 and 2022. These videos were published on established video game community channels where the publishers published mainly video game or video game related content. Approximately 6 hours over 2 days were spent finding appropriate videos. The video searches were conducted over the days of May 2nd and 3rd of 2024.

All video searches were done on the Firefox internet browser. This browser was chosen because it is the one installed on the main personal computer that almost all of the work on this

thesis was done. All actual research was done within this browser with the following setup. Within the browser, some safety extensions and add-ons were enabled. Adblock Plus and AdGuard AdBlocker were both enabled, and their main purposes are to block pop-up and auto-played ads on all websites used within the browser (*AdGuard – The world’s most advanced ad blocker! Get the best ad-free experience. AdGuard*, n.d.). JavaScript-Java Bridge was enabled, and its main function is to allow websites that use Java programs to still function after Java became a defunct and unsupported media platform (*JavaScript-Java Bridge-get this extension for Firefox*, 2019). This program would have had no influence over search results or playability of any video on YouTube. Privacy Badger and uBlock Origin were both enabled with their main functions being blocking ads, tracking software, and some spyware and malware (*Privacy Badger*. Electronic Frontier Foundation, n.d.; *Ublock Origin*. Ublock Origin – Free, n.d.). These are both programs that block information being sent to and stored on my computer. While they would not have affected any initial searches done within Google or YouTube, there may be some influence on any follow-up searches insofar as search data and cookies were not being stored on my computer that would have influenced future searches, therefore giving me broader results.

Initially, video searches were done through the Google search engine’s “Video” tab. While unable to prove there is a conflict with the results, all search results were coming back as YouTube links. Google owns YouTube so it is common for Google to feed YouTube videos in general searches. While this could be considered a conflict, it is also not a surprise as YouTube is by far the largest video sharing site with over 2.4 billion active users (Dixon, 2025) with approximately 122 million (GMI Research Team, 2025) of them being active daily, and over 4.3 billion videos with more than 500 hours of new videos being uploaded every minute (Broz,

2025; Hale, 2019). Because of this, all media searches were moved into the internal YouTube search engine.

While deciding on an age range several different factors were taken into consideration. The United Nations defines youth as anyone between the ages of 15 and 24 and has since 1985 (United Nations, n.d.). The Government of Canada considers anyone between 15 and 29 “youth” (Canadian Heritage, 2021). The United States Federal Trade Commission passed an entire set of safety laws that are directed toward children under the age of 13 (*Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (“coppa”)*, 2023). So, even though 13 is lower than what is stated by both the United Nations and Canadian Heritage, 13 was set as the low end of the age range because that was the clear-cut age that was found for the purpose of staying within the law. While Canada does set the age of youth higher (29) (Canadian Heritage, 2021) than the United Nations (24) (United Nations, n.d.), I decided to go with the United Nations upper limit as I feel much older 29 fell to far outside of what is generally considered “youth” by most standards.

While YouTube does allow for users under the age of 13 to upload videos onto its platform, the choice was made to exclude any videos from users under the age of 13 so that there was no conflict with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule, otherwise “COPPA”. The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule lays out a variety of laws on the acquisition, storage, and usage of information collected or given by children under the age of 13 online, either freely or by deception (*Childrend’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (“coppa”)*, 2023). So that I did not unintentionally misuse any information possibly given, even by freely uploading the information to YouTube, by anyone under the age of 13, they were omitted from consideration in the final video analysis.

There were several other criteria videos were judged on that made them eligible for inclusion or exclusion from this study. While there was originally no minimum or maximum length of time for inclusion, many videos were excluded because they were too short to give any in depth reasoning behind points made. This ended with the exclusion of all YouTube shorts as the longest they can be is three minutes (Sherman, 2024). While shorts are a viable video format on the platform, the short length of time very rarely allowed for the YouTuber to expand on much of what they were saying to give reasoning behind what they did or why what they thought were important when it came to making friends while online gaming.

Another prevalent reason for excluding videos from this study was the inclusion of advertisements within the video. Note, this did not include the pre-roll advertisements, post-roll advertisements, or advertisements that will stop the video and play outside of the run time of said video. These advertisements are automatically placed by YouTube and are not in control of the individual YouTuber. Outside of not being included in the video's runtime, these ads are often identified by having a “skip” function after five seconds of play (The QuickFrame Team, 2025). The videos that were excluded from this study included in video advertisements, product placements, or sponsorships placed within the video, and the advertisement itself is often done by the YouTuber themselves. If the YouTuber includes a paid promotion or sponsorship within their video, they are required to let YouTube know when uploading the video (with a check box). YouTube displays a small pop-up at the beginning of the video that says “Includes paid promotion” in the upper lefthand corner of the video as it starts playing.

The choice was made to exclude videos with paid promotional content because sometimes the product being sold within the video could have caused a conflict of interest with the information the video was trying to convey. Often, the product being sold to the viewers,

while being tech related somehow, did not conflict with the message of the video but there was a significant amount that could have so it was decided to exclude all videos with paid promotions. Some examples that could have caused conflict of interests were ads for other social media platforms, websites, or mobile games that incentivised users to invite other users for in game rewards like the mobile game *Raid Shadow Legends* (Bowen, 2021). This was also to help mitigate the issue of economic censorship within these videos. In the case of these videos on YouTube, economic censorship would be the money spent by sponsor's would dictate certain inclusion criteria in a creator's video (Richards & Murphy, 1996) or money spent by an advertiser would help generate views by promoting the videos in areas it may not normally show up in because of paid algorithmic manipulation (Sheikh, 2025).

Artificial Intelligence or AI videos were excluded from consideration from this study. YouTube requires most artificially generated videos to be labelled (Binder, 2025). Any video found with this label was automatically excluded. Because I could not verify that they were not artificially generated videos, videos with no voice over or automated-only voice over content was also excluded from this study.

Many content creators are also video game streamers so if they showed their faces either in their own YouTube video or on another platform (like Twitch), their video was included in consideration for this study. For various reasons, some content creators and streamers do not feel comfortable showing their real faces to their audience. Some games, like VR chat-based games, encourage you do create and live as your avatar. That did not exclude them from being part of this study but did require more verification to make sure they were not artificially generated videos. Videos that did not show the creators face but could be verified by voice and live

gameplay on YouTube or Twitch, like Cid from VRChat, were not excluded for consideration in this study.

There were some other minor exclusionary criteria that came up as video sorting and choosing took place. Sound and video quality were considered as the pairing down of videos began. Some videos had poor sound quality which made them hard to hear because they audio was too low or uncomfortably loud and they were excluded. While not prevalent, a few videos had epilepsy warnings on them so for the safety of anyone who follows up on these videos in the future, they were excluded. Several “troll” videos were found and excluded where they were labelled as videos for making friends but were filled with information on how to troll, hinder, or otherwise make others angry while playing online (Tworish, 2020).

The first video search was the phrase, “How to make friends online.” While it did bring back some very interesting videos, the search results for this were too wide and varied outside the scope of video games. Search results included videos for applications, social media platforms, and interestingly, often just omitted the require “online” from the search parameters.

The second search was titled, “how to make friends online gaming.” This search result brought me pages of videos. The most common form of video that was being made by YouTubers on this subject were “list” videos. Examples of these types of videos are “Top 10 ways to [X]” or “12 Hacks to [X].” While many of these videos that showed up in my search results were opinion based on how things were ordered, they, in general, did a fairly good job pointing out what the YouTuber thought was important when it came to making friends in online games. This format, to me, seemed like a perfect way to collect the themes that the online gamers thought were important to them and compare and contrast them to what other gamers who published videos thought were important as well.

From clicking on a video, I would often use the “Recommended Videos” bar slider on the right side of the webpage to find other videos of this sort. I would click from one video to the next, initially adding them to a playlist to save the videos without watching them. I saved them solely off the titles alone. This procedure was followed for all subsequent searches as well. After my initial chain of clicking on videos and saving them was finished, there were roughly 15 videos in my playlist to sort through later.

A third search was conducted using the search title, “how to find friends to play games with online.” A large majority of the videos that were offered were duplicates of recommended videos from previous searches. The new videos from this search were added to the playlist and clicked on, attempting to find new videos through the “Recommended Videos” bar as well.

Several other changes were made to specific words in the search title to see if the video search would yield different results. Instead of “friends”, the words “peers”, “mates”, and “buddies” were used with little or no variation in results.

From this point on, the attempt was made to see if narrowing the search down to a specific game would help yield new videos. The format being “How to make friends to play [Online Game Name] with.” The games searched were Minecraft, CS:GO, World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy 11, Final Fantasy 14, Roblox, Fortnite, Overwatch, and League of Legends. Some of these searches had more varied results than others. The larger the online gaming community, the more videos would show up. Many of the top videos in these searches were videos that were already presented to me in other searches and already in the saved playlist. Through these subsequent searches, the playlist of saved videos was at 23.

I did a first watch through of all the videos forming and using the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed above to sort through the playlist and delete anything that did not meet the standards to convey usable information for this study.

After the first watch through, 12 videos were deleted. These first exclusions were for being AI generated, paid promotions, being unable to verify the content creator as being human, or being “troll” videos.

I did a second watch through of all 11 remaining videos. For this watch through, I deleted three videos because they were shorter videos and fell more specifically into “list” videos. This means that while listing actions or experiences for making friends like the other videos did, there was very little in the way of explanation or extrapolation on why these things were on the list or why the content creator thought they were important to be included. This left me with eight videos.

While all remaining videos were roughly the same in quality, with good, more in depth and deeply explained perspectives from their various gaming creators, I decided at this point that, since there were not a significant number of videos left from any singular online gaming community, I would give equal weight to the communities that were represented. Because of that, I excluded two of the three remaining Fortnite player videos and one of the two remaining Minecraft player videos. This left me one video by a creator in each of the following online gaming communities: Fortnite, World of Warcraft, Minecraft, VRChat, and Grand Theft Auto V. This provided a useful sampling of online gaming communities as a whole as the remaining five videos were diverse in game type, game age, community size, userbase, in-game interactive capabilities, and potential relationship type (competitive vs co-operative) based on the game’s narrative and objectives.

Name of Video	10 hacks for making friends in VRChat (Especially if you're shy. . .)	GTA Online Top 5 tips to Meet and Make Reliable Friends	How to Make Friends in Classic WoW!	19 ways to Make friends In Minecraft!	How to get friends to play with In Fortnite!
Published Date	February 22, 2022	July 4, 2019	May 7, 2019	December 22, 2019	May 28, 2021
Publisher	Cid from VRChat, しどCh	TheProfession	Ebbnflow	Sub'sWorld	HeyItsCameron
Channel Subscribers When Video Found	7.72k	7.7mil	17.6k	1.32mil	14.4k
Video Length	11 minutes 33 seconds	10 minutes 1 second	7 minutes 21 seconds	10 minutes 4 seconds	10 minutes 21 seconds

Number of Video Views When Found	113k	197k	12k	1.3mil	23k
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyS17Juy2lc	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7ihP2RkQYI	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7L7rKvWNQM	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzEWeTi538Y	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHRS4w3pPG4

Data Analysis

“The numbers Mason, what do they mean?!” - Jason Hudson, Call of Duty: Black Ops

To minimize familiarity bias in the video choice and analysis order, given my experience with both Fortnite and Minecraft, a separate playlist was created on YouTube for the five videos chosen for analysis. Play was randomized using YouTube's "Shuffle" option. The order that YouTube randomized them was *19 Ways to Make Friends in Minecraft!* By Sub's World, *10 Hacks for Making Friends in VRChat (Especially if You're Shy ...)* by Cid from VRChat | し ど Ch., *How To Get Friends To Play With in Fortnite! (Find Good Teammates for Pubs/Creative/Tournaments)* by HeyItsCameron, *GTA Online Top 5 Tips To Meet And Make Reliable Friends* by TheProfessional, and lastly, *How to make Friends in Classic WoW!* By Ebbnflow.

Individual video analysis will follow this order below before proceeding to cross-video thematic analysis. Each video will have a table summarizing and listing the suggestions of actions a player take or experiences a player have to help build an online peer relationship in their online gaming space (column two of each table) with a brief reason as to why the gamer believes each suggestion is important for making friends (column three of each table). More in-depth analysis of each video will follow its corresponding summary table.

Sub's World

Sub's World is a Minecraft video creator who has produced over 200 videos since August 2nd, 2017 (YouTube, 2017). Minecraft is a survival sandbox game, released in 2011, that drops players into one of seemingly endless worlds to "Create. Explore. Survive." (*What is Minecraft? Build, discover realms & more.* Minecraft.net, n.d.). Minecraft can be played solo or on online servers with other players, with over 204.33 million active players (*Minecraft user statistics: How many people play Minecraft in 2025?*. SearchLogistics, 2025) across ten different gaming platforms (*Minecraft.* ActivePlayer.io, n.d.-b). Sub's Worlds' main content is "Countdown" or "List" videos that explain different aspects of playing Minecraft. From base building designs to modifications and additions to the base game, Sub's World will cover it by making a list of them. What has made them so popular, though, is that the narrator of the channel gives all the information, and "Sub" is the non-verbal player on screen that demonstrates the "how" or "how not" to do something to the viewers. Throughout the videos, Sub often gets things wrong, and the narrator must guide them back to the correct path of action. He also has a Twitter account that has over 484k followers (*Sub's World.* X.com, 2013).

Sub's World uses this video to describe actions and experiences they have had interacting with others in various online Minecraft servers. By describing their experiences with others

online, Sub's World explains how specific interactions can be important to starting a peer relationship and growing that into an ongoing friendship in Minecraft. Using their own experiences, Sub's World details how they made friends doing things like:

- 1) defending other players against bad players
- 2) shared their materials and knowledge with newer players who are just starting
- 3) throwing parties to meet new people, and many other examples of things to do (and not to do!) to make new friends and grow already existing friendships.

19 Ways to Make Friends in Minecraft

Video Publication Channel: Sub's World

Video Publication Date: December 22nd, 2019

Channel of Channel Subscribers when video was found: 1.32 million

Number of Video Views when video was found: 1.3 million

Video Length: 10 minutes 4 seconds

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzEWeTi538Y>



Suggestion Number	Suggested Action and/or Experience	Reason for Suggesting Action or Experience (How it can affect an online relationship)
1	Don't kill other players	Noone is going to want to hang out with you; it isn't nice
2	Don't prank other players	Chaotic; makes you less approachable
3	Join in with relevant group discussions	Talk to people, ask questions, find common ground, you may learn things about the world and Minecraft
4	Teach people how to play the game	We were all new players at some point; they may know something you don't
5	Give people food to heal their pets	Players get pets to not feel so alone in game, give them food to help them survive is helpful

6	Find another surviving group	A lot of friendships start by random encounters with other surviving groups
7	Defend players from bad players, griefers and hackers!	They ruin builds, servers, and chat. Shows other players you are one of the good guys.
8	Give them the right materials for their build	Giving other players materials to help them finish their builds is helpful.
9	Let them collect the loot from the dungeon	Sharing loot from dungeons that you explore together is the fair way to play.
10	Give them diamonds	Diamonds are always needed by all players. If you have extra, giving them to players who need them is helpful.
11	Be a good Redstoner	Learning how to Redstone is one of the most powerful tools in the game. If you get good at it, people will seek you out for help.
12	Head onto a Multiplier Server	Don't just play solo. Go online and play with others.
13	Offer Constructive Criticism	Everyone makes mistakes. If you see a player struggling, offer tips, tricks, or suggestions. No yelling!
14	Throw a Party!	Gather and use your extra materials to throw a party for people online. Building a dance floor or firework show can make you the talk of the server.

15	Start a Shop or Business!	Invest extra resources into building a shop or business. Online servers have player-based economies. Partake in them and make your prices fair.
16	Harvest and replant their crops	If you come across a player home with finished crops, harvest them, place them in a crate, replant them, and leave a note that this harvest is on you. They will remember your name in a good way!
17	Let them collect the Ender Dragon XP	Sharing the XP from the Ender dragon is the fair way distribute it when working with others.
18	Record a Machinima Together!	While it can be complicated, filming and producing an online short together is great teamwork and a lot of fun.
19	Be a good person or ask!	Follow rules, be kind, and just be an overall morally upstanding player

This is the most extensive list of the five videos, and because of that, it gives more varied ideas on ways to make friends within the online Minecraft game community. One reason for this may be the nature of the game Minecraft. While there are varied ways to play it, at its heart, Minecraft is a survival game. While a player can play by themselves, surviving online often means teaming up with other players to build, adventure, and share, all while leveraging teamwork and having reliable friends. Because of the complexity of the game at times, Sub's World gives us a litany of suggestions on dos and don'ts on how to make reliable friends and how following these suggestions can help start peer relationships within Minecraft.

While many of the actions taken and experiences had are very game-specific to Minecraft, as we go through them, many of them fall into a few general themes. The following sections will outline the general themes identified for the actions done or interactions had, along with the rationale for why the suggestions fall where they do and their importance in making friends. Some actions taken or interactions had can fall into several different themes.

Be Social

This one may seem obvious, but to make peers in an online game, someone would need to be actively playing and interacting with other players online. Once online, to make friends, a player is going to have to reach out to other players to interact with.

The first step of this process would cover suggestions twelve (head to a multiplayer server), six (find another surviving group), and three (Join in with relevant group discussion). These actions would be the first step in forming peer relationships with other gamers on an online Minecraft server. Meet up with some other players and get to know them by talking.

Participate in the World

After a player meets up with other players, the next actions or experiences a player should try involves participating in the group and being an active user on the server. This would cover suggestions like eleven (be a good Redstoner), fourteen (throw a party), fifteen (Start a shop or business), and eighteen Record a Machinima. Hosting a party on the server for the friend group is a fun activity for potential new friends to bond during. Hone crafting skills as a Redstoner and offer services to help with builds shows that the player is willing to help the community and be part of it. Building a shop and selling rare materials or specialty-crafted goods also makes a player active in the community and makes them welcome. Getting a friend group together, record an in-game movie, and publish it online can also be a great bonding experience

to help grow an online friendship. In other words, the player needs to participate in the world they want to be a part of and make themselves a welcome addition to an online community.

This is important because if a player can carve a niche out in a world, or just in a small group of other players, it can make them feel needed and included. This also lends itself to many of the other following themes because, once they feel included in the group or on the server, players often want to work hard to maintain that reputation and keep that friend group together.

Share

Several of the suggestions made by Sub's World suggest that sharing materials with other players is a viable way to make new peers within the online Minecraft community. Suggestion number four is "Teach people to play the game," which can be interpreted as sharing your knowledge of the game. Suggestions 5 (give people food to heal their pets), 8 (give them the right materials for their build), 9 (let them collect loot from the dungeon), 10 (give them diamonds), and 17 (let them collect the Ender Dragon XP) all correspond with sharing in-game items like loot, food, building materials, and experience points with other players, whether to be helpful or to be fair.

The reason sharing is important in a survival game when trying to make friends online is that new players often start with nothing. That is the point of the game. Spawn in, find food and shelter, and survive within the surroundings. Sharing food or materials with another player can mean their life or death in-game. Players can invest tens to thousands of hours into a single Minecraft world, and sharing materials with them can mean saving their entire game or simply showing them that they have found someone in the game who is looking for others to share with. It builds a level of trust between players when they are willing to give something, which will quite possibly lead to them giving things back in return.

This same idea of sharing goes with sharing the spoils of adventures together. Sharing experience points when killing a monster, like the Ender Dragon, or sharing the loot in a treasure chest after delving into a dungeon shows that the player is not greedy and, not only appreciate the hard work they put in to complete the quest or fight, but that they deserve it because they earned it and are not going to keep it greedily.

Be Helpful

While suggestions on "sharing" could fall under this category, I believe this theme is broader than that. There is some crossover because sharing, in and of itself, is helpful; these other helpful suggestions cover other types of gameplay. While teaching a new player how to play the game is sharing knowledge, taking the time to show the player game mechanics, safe gaming practices, and giving them tips and tricks for building, mobility, and combat goes beyond the simple sharing of resources.

This theme is more action-based. Suggestions like number seven about defending other players against griefers, hackers, and trolls who are trying to break their builds and ruin their games are more actionable and show that the player is there to help. It is the same for suggestion thirteen about offering constructive criticism. Do not yell at them or make fun of them. Give them some tips or tricks that may help them become better players. Then there are helpful things to do for them, as suggested in sixteen (Harvest and replant their crops). These are all great suggestions on ways to show other players that a player is friendly by just being helpful to them, and those helpful actions may come back around in future interactions, deepening a potential online friendship.

Be Kind

While, once again, sharing and being helpful do have some crossover into the theme of "being kind", I feel as though this has more to do with how you interact with other players by following the written and unwritten rules between players. Yes, sharing is kind, but it may not be as impactful as breaking server rules or acting rudely or hatefully towards other players. This closely aligns with social norms in the "real world" but only within the rules, regulations, and expectations of the virtual world the gamers are playing in.

Suggestions one (Don't kill other players), two (Don't prank other players), and nineteen (Be a good person or ask) specifically touch on some "dos" and "don'ts" that outline some of the social expectations of a good player within the Minecraft community. One and two specifically tell players not to kill or prank other players. These are activities that fall under the actions of griefers and trolls, which the seventh suggestion suggests should be fought against. Hacking is also mentioned in suggestion seven as being something a player should fight against, suggesting that a player would be seen as a bad player if they were doing it.

Suggestion nineteen states "be a good person and ask," suggesting that, even before help is given, make sure to ask the player if they want the offered help. Sometimes other players do not want help. Sometimes players will want to figure out or do things on their own. Even if a player is trying to do something good for another player, it may not mean that it will be appreciated, so just like in the "real world", stop and ask before doing anything to or for another player.

Outside of the themes "be social" and "participate within the world", this may be one of the most important themes for suggestions because it lays down the rules, regulations, and social norms that are expected to be followed by other players if they are to be a respected and accepted player in an online Minecraft community or server.

Be Unique/Memorable

While this suggestion may have some overlap with other themes, this theme depends on the type of player a person wants to be and how they would like to participate in the world. It would depend on what the player finds fun to do within the game, and the interest they have in playing the game in the first place. For the Minecraft experiences or suggestions made in this video, some suggestions this theme may cover, if the player decides to reenact them, would be suggestions like suggestion eleven (be a good Redstoner), fourteen (Throw a party!), fifteen (start a shop or business), sixteen (harvest and replant crops), among others. What they are suggesting is that a player find something they like to do in-game and become remembered for doing it. If a player finds an action they enjoy, do it often and share it with others enough that they become known for it. Identify the community's needs and, if the player enjoys it, establish a shop to become a trusted dealer. If they enjoy building Redstone machines, share them with others and pass on the knowledge of how to do it. If a player enjoys the battling aspect of the game, they should acquire good gear and join the trusted first line of defence against attacks from mobs, pillagers, griefers, or hackers on bases or towns. In other words, find what they like doing and become "that guy" for it within the community.

Cid from VRChat | しどCh.

Cid from VRChat | しどCh. started their YouTube channel on April 10th, 2020, where they aim to "help gamers aged 18-35 live their best life in VR!" (YouTube, 2020). VRChat is an online Virtual Reality space (even though Virtual Reality gear is not required) released on January 16th, 2014, that lets players "Create a Universe of Endless Possibilities" (VRChat, n.d.-a). It does this by letting users create worlds to interact in with games, hangouts, and many other in-game uses (*VRChat creator guidelines*. Vrchat, n.d.-b). VRChat has over 100k active users,

which is enormous for a Virtual Reality based online platform (*VRChat API Metrics*. Grafana, n.d.) Cid's channel offers 43 videos to help gamers interested in gaming with virtual reality. These include technology and equipment reviews, "how-to" videos, and tips and tricks for navigating VRChat. While Cid has a deeper male voice, they choose to present themselves online with a female "anime" avatar.

Unlike the other videos being analyzed for this study, Cid specializes in Japanese-speaking VR spaces, as can be seen by the fact that the second part of his YouTube channel is in Japanese, which translates, in this usage, to mean "guidance; leadership; instruction; direction; or coaching" (*Japanese dictionary search for “しど.”* しど - Jisho.org, n.d.). By having this tag on their channel, they are signifying that they are creating and posting content to be instructional to their viewers. They do this in this video by sharing some of their experiences trying to make new friends in-game. Some of the experiences they share in this video include their trials with finding the right kind of avatar that they were the most comfortable in and their exploration of many friend groups before they were able to finally settle within certain found friend groups (mainly in Japanese). By sharing their experiences, they not only found online friends within VRChat but also built their own community outside of the game. They help grow that community by connecting their YouTube page to their Twitter account, which is sometimes translated into English but primarily in Japanese.

10 Hacks for Making Friends in VRChat (Especially if You're Shy...)

Video Publication Channel: Cid from VRChat | しど Ch.

Video Publication Date: February 22nd, 2022

Number of Channel Subscribers when video was found: 7.72k

Number of Video Views when video was found: 113K

Video Length: 11 minutes 33 seconds

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyS17Juy2lc>



Suggestion Number	Suggested Action and/or Experience	Reason for Suggesting Action or Experience (How it can affect an online relationship)
1	Compliment their avatar	People spend hours looking for the perfect avatar or spend a lot of real-life money on a custom in game avatar. Be genuine and compliment their choices. It makes them feel good!
2	Don't join front page servers!	Front page servers are full of new players, little kids, and "normies" who don't know or choose not to use the in-game search functions. Find a server

		that is unique to your interests full of people who share your same interests.
3	Try activities!	Do activities that your server offers with other players to complete common goals. Working together helps people become friends quicker.
4	Roleplay!	Lean into your avatar or your world by roleplaying in it. Pick a job and “be that” or really lean into your avatar character. It adds to the world.
5	Choose an avatar that suits you!	Build or chose an avatar that you “feel comfortable in.” That doesn’t mean “real.” Players with similar avatar types will gravitate towards each other and it helps you find others that are in game with similar interests.
6	Don’t be mean, tease, or troll. Ever!	Just because you think joking, teasing, or trolling may be funny, others won’t find it funny. Don’t use harmful items, obnoxious chat, or offensive or shocking avatars.
7	Be different!	If you have a talent, show it! Singing, playing an instrument, art, a skill, anything. Express it.
8	Fake it ‘til you make it!	If you are super shy or anxious, use the game to “pretend” to be outgoing. You can train yourself to talk to people and be more comfortable.

9	Join a Discord	VRChat worlds are always having events. Join their Discord to follow their schedules and connect with others outside of the game.
10	Initiate the Conversation!	It's hard but just walk up and say something. People often assume you want to be left alone in game if you are off by yourself.

While many of the actions taken and experiences had in this video are very game-specific to VRChat, as we go through them, many of them fall into a few general themes. The following sections will outline the general themes identified for the actions done or interactions had, along with the rationale for why the suggestions fall where they do and their importance in making friends. Some interactions or experiences can fall into several different themes.

Be Social

The most significant number of suggestions that Cid makes in their video fall into the theme of being social and participating in activities. Half of the list of suggestions, five of the ten, can be included in this theme. Suggestions three (try activities), four (roleplay), eight (fake it 'til you make it), nine (join a Discord), and ten (Initiate the conversation) could fall into this theme. With an emphasis on shy players in the title of the video, these suggestions encourage players to step out of their comfort zone and explore the interactive worlds that users create. With suggestions like "Initiate the conversation" and "fake it 'til you make it," Cid suggests that users, especially shy ones, make the first move in meeting new people when trying to make friends. Several times in these sections of the video, they reiterate that the worst that can happen is that a connection is not made and the players move on.

Suggestion ten is to join a Discord server[s]. As stated before, Discord is an application that allows players to chat via audio, video, and text outside of the game. It is often used to coordinate with other players or get information about in-game activities. That is why Cid suggests joining Discord servers for VRChat servers that an individual enjoys playing on. Not only is it another way for players to keep in touch with potential friends they may have made in-game, but the VRChat server owner or players can use it to coordinate in-game meetups and activities on specific servers that a player is part of.

Participate in the World

While not part of the theme participation, suggestion two, "Do not join front page servers", is more of a tip on how to make the rest of the experiences within this theme easier. Cid notes that the servers on the front page are often crowded with new players, kids, and "normies" who have not grasped the game's deeper mechanics yet; as a result, they are filled with random groups of players who may or may not share any common interests. They suggest searching for and joining servers with descriptions and other players who share common interests to facilitate easier socialization and increase the potential for finding new friends.

"Try activities" and "Roleplay" fall into the theme of participation. Cid suggests that through trying activities, players can meet people who share similar interests as the player, thereby facilitating the start of a friendship. Roleplaying adds to this by suggesting that, if the player finds themselves on a themed server or in a themed game, they should lean into their assigned character, thereby deepening the immersiveness of the game or world. Through roleplay within a game or world, a player can become someone other players seek out within the story or because of the extra immersion they bring to gameplay. Roleplaying takes on another meaning in this video, and its other interpretation will be discussed within another theme ahead.

Be Kind

Two suggestions fall under the theme of being kind to other players in this video. First is suggestion one, "Compliment their avatar," and it seems to be a major "do" when it comes to making new friends in VRChat. Cid points out the importance of this because players often spend a significant amount of time and potentially much money choosing their avatar to represent themselves in the game. They can spend tens of hours just sorting through the pre-loaded avatar items, building their perfect avatar, or even spend more than a thousand dollars on custom-built avatars to be loaded in-game. Simply walking up to someone new and complimenting their avatar can lay the groundwork for a new friendship, as it acknowledges the time and effort they invested in creating it.

The second suggestion that falls into this theme is a series of "don'ts". "Do not be mean, tease, or troll." Cid goes on to break this down even further. Just because someone may think a joke at someone else's expense is funny, it may not be perceived that way by other players or the one who is the point of the joke. They then share their own story about how, at first, they thought it would be funny to point a gun at players when they met them in-game, but it backfired every time. That was until it happened to them. Since it is a virtual world, they described how staring down the barrel of a gun was not as funny when it was happening to them, and once they stopped, they found it much easier to make friends. They then point out that using offensive avatars, intentionally bothering other players, or constantly harassing them can lead to a player ending up alone in-game.

Be Who You Are OR Be Who You Want to Be

While these are two distinct themes (the expression of actual vs. ideal self (Jin, 2009)), the way Cid explains them in their video, drawing on their own experiences, is so intertwined

that I will discuss them together in this section. These two themes can seem contradictory at times, but the way Cid describes them and their application to shy gamers is well explained by the end of the video. Suggestion five (Choose an avatar that suits you) fits into both of these themes, with suggestions four (Roleplay) and eight (Fake it 'til you make it) also being found in the "be social" and "participate in the world" themes as well, but being described differently.

Suggestion five is "Choose an avatar that suits you!" Cid makes an important distinction here, which does not mean the avatar must look like the player or even be "real". The explanation of their journey to finding their own avatar is why these two themes are being discussed together. They suggest the player take the time to create an avatar that they feel most comfortable acting as in the game. They even recount their experience starting up the game and creating a male avatar that they liked, mainly because they have a deeper male voice, and they thought it would throw off players they met if they had gone as a female. As time progressed, they encountered many other male players with female, animal, and other unique avatars. They decided to return and choose an "anime girl" style avatar, as it made them feel most comfortable. They even mentioned that it was harder to make friends in-game because other players could tell they were not comfortable playing as that avatar. Once they were in an avatar they were comfortable in, other males who wore female anime avatars would congregate around them, and they started making friends much more easily. They noticed that for the other avatar users as well. Furies congregated with other furies. Animal players played with other animal players and so on.

This leads into the other meanings of suggestions four and eight, "Roleplay" and "Fake it 'til you make it." Cid explains during these sections of the video that these do not just apply to in-world games or immersion addition. These apply to the player in-game as well if they are trying to make friends. Because much of this video is aimed toward shy members of the community,

Cid uses these two suggestions to tell the viewers to roleplay as the person they want to be in real life and fake being outgoing until they train themselves how to do it. By feeling more comfortable in the avatar they chose, it may be easier for them to act out how they want to be in real life by practicing in the virtual game worlds they take part in.

The final suggestion in this theme is suggestion seven, "Be different!" While the wording may suggest that they mean for the players to be different than who they are, the explanation ends up being "show everyone in-game what makes you unique." They point out how popular players can become who have good singing voices or play instruments. Players skilled in art or design can be hired to create items for worlds or avatars for other players. Even something as simple as being a good storyteller or someone who listens well can make a player valuable and draw others to them. The main point is to show others what makes each of them unique, which will also make them memorable to other players.

Express Yourself

The meaning of this theme varies depending on which of the two themes discussed in the previous section a player chooses to participate in. However, it still encompasses many of the same suggested actions as Cid.

If the player decides that they are going to express themselves in the game as they are in the real world (Be Who You Are), then Expressing Yourself would be creating an avatar that truly expresses who you are to the rest of the in-game community, as you do, or would like to, express to the offline communities you are part of. While this does carry some nuances that would be player-specific, it means being the person they are most comfortable with when online with their online friends. There may be contradictions between the game's world and the real

world, where players cannot express their true sexuality, gender, or other aspects safely. Within the game, however, they can express themselves and act as they truly feel in real life.

The other side of "expressing yourself" would be to "be who you want to be." This would include suggestion four (roleplay) and suggestion eight (fake it 'til you make it). Cid suggests using the online VR spaces to practice changes that a player may want to make within themselves. Once again, aiming this video at shy gamers, Cid suggests practicing being more outgoing, initiating conversations (suggestion ten), and getting more comfortable doing new things online so they become easier for the player offline.

A final suggestion, while by the title would not seem to fit into this theme, is suggestion seven, "Be Different." Cid goes on to explain that they do not specifically mean to try to act differently from other players, as that would contradict many of the other suggested actions they say should be done. Instead, they suggest that if a player has a talent, they should express it; if a player plays an instrument, put on a show! If they are into art, share it within the community. If they have a skill, show it off. In other words, the player should express who they are by showing the community what makes them special and what they like.

Be Creative

While covered in the previous two themes as well, some of the explanations and experiences that Cid explains in their video extend into a separate theme of "be creative." While this theme once again covers suggestion seven (be different), five (choose an avatar that suits you), and four (roleplay), Cid points out the importance of making sure that the player explores and expresses themselves in fun and creative ways. Share their art. Share their music. Use their skills in new ways. They express themselves by creating a creative avatar for themselves or others. Take the character they are roleplaying and dive deep into it, making it immersive within

the world. These things are just as important to others and the online spaces the player joins as they are to the players themselves, and are crucial to making new friends in those spaces.

Be Unique/Memorable

This theme comes from a combination of the previous two themes. By expressing who a player is and showcasing what makes them who they are, or by sharing their creativity with the other players around them, they become memorable and unique to the server. This can be achieved by filling a role that is missing in a role-playing element or showcasing what makes them special with a unique talent or skill. As a result, others on the server will likely remember them and reach out to become friends.

HeyItsCameron

HeyItsCameron is a YouTube content creator and Twitch streamer who creates content for and streams multiple games. He began creating content for YouTube on December 24th, 2019, and currently has close to 500 videos on topics ranging from tutorials and guides for games like Fortnite and Predecessor to computer accessory reviews and setting optimizations (YouTube, 2019). Fortnite is a multiplayer game released in July 2017, initially focusing on base building and defence (*Fortnite*| *Download & Play for free – epic games store*, n.d.-a) . In September 2017, it introduced its most popular game mode, *Battle Royale*, which pits 100 players against each other in a match where the last survivor wins (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.). In January 2025, Fortnite reached an all-time peak for concurrent players, with over 14 million players online at any given time, averaging more than 1 million players per hour (*Fortnite player count · most played Fortnite maps*. Fortnite.GG, n.d.). While he is primarily a solo streamer and content creator, there are times when his wife streams or appears in his

YouTube content alongside him. From his YouTube page, another player can connect to his Twitter account, Twitch channel, TikTok page, and Discord server for his followers.

In this video, ItsCameron mainly focuses on his experiences of meeting new gamers in competitive, open queue games and what has and hasn't worked for him (and his wife) when it comes to continuing a potential friendship with the other gamers he has met in them.

How To Get Friends To Play With in Fortnite! (Find Good Teammates for Pubs/Create/Tournaments)

Video Publication Channel: HeyItsCameron

Video Publication Date: May 28th, 2021

Number of Channel Subscribers when video was found: 14.4k

Number of Video Views when video was found: 23k

Video Length: 7 minutes 21 seconds

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHRS4w3pPG4>



Suggestion Number	Suggested Action and/or Experience Had	Reason for Suggesting Action or Experience (How it can affect an online relationship)
1	Have your public game matching settings set to "Fill"	It will match you up with random players to meet and play with.
2	Don't do anything crazy or "out there" when meeting new people	Be friendly and stay chill and random players may add you to their friend list. Don't go crazy or obnoxious on the mic.
3	Use fortnitetracker.com to look for players	Use this popular site to check your stats and look for other players who are looking for people to play with. Sort by all kinds of criteria and send messages on the site or on Discord.

While many of the actions taken and experiences had in this video are very game-specific to Fortnite, as they were analyzed, many of them fall into a few general themes. The following sections will outline the general themes identified for the actions done or interactions had, along with the rationale for why the suggestions fall where they do and their importance in making friends. Some interactions or experiences can fall into several different themes.

The shortest of the five videos being analyzed, HeyItsCameron, primarily focuses on finding people to play with, understanding how to act and what not to do when meeting new players, and the potential consequences of different actions with new players. Below will be a breakdown of the themes that are covered in this video.

Be Social

Suggestions one (have your public game set to “fill”) and three (use fortnitetracker.com to look for players) both talk about setting up Fortnite and using outside resources to find new players. The suggestion is to inform players how to set up their game for random placement with unknown players. By setting the game to “fill”, this tells the matchmaking software in Fortnite that you are willing to be placed with other players who are looking to play in a group that you and they do not already know (*Unable et al., n.d.*). This way, a player can meet new players before the match starts and load up to play in a competitive match with them.

Suggestion three suggests using an outside website to look up players as well. The site he suggests, fortnitetracker.com, can be used in many ways to find players. He explains how the website can be used to look up players who are currently online and looking for others to play with. This site allows players to be sorted by region, language, in-game statistics, in-game event interest, gaming platform, and more. Sorting players in various ways can help them find those who would work best with their current gameplay, increasing their chances of similar gameplay styles, communication preferences, competence levels, and game type preferences, potentially increasing desired principles, values, or locations between players to help them make friends.

At one point in the video, HeyItsCameron uses his video as a way for players to connect. He suggests that viewers of the video leave their gaming system and Epic ID in the comment section so other players in the community can find and add them to their friends list in-game.

Be kind

During suggestion two, HeyItsCameron goes into the dos and don'ts of what to do and how to act when meeting new players who join a group. He suggests that new players should refrain from doing anything “too crazy or out there” that could be found obnoxious or toxic by other players. If they have a microphone, he suggests just starting with small talk with questions

like “How is your day?” or something as simple as “Hey. How is it going?” Questions about their other games are a good icebreaker as well. Asking if they have won any matches yet is a great way to start a conversation about just playing the game.

He also mentions some things not to do. A couple of toxic behaviours he mentions that will deter people from wanting to play include yelling and playing loud music or noises over the mic. He also mentions that in other games he has played, name-calling was a huge issue, so he wants to avoid that as well.

He offers one final piece of advice to younger players: to be careful and protect themselves online. Be careful with the information given out when matching with new players. Specifically, information about the specifics of where they live is necessary because some players online can be creeps.

He ends suggestion two by letting viewers know that just by being “chill and relaxed” when meeting new players, Fortnite is an easy place to make new friends and meet people from all over the world.

TheProffesional

TheProffesional is a variety game YouTube streamer and has been creating YouTube content since November 29th, 2015 (YouTube, 2015). Patrick, his real name, is a Polish-American gamer known for cosplaying various characters in the games he streams, with over 3.8k videos on his channel (Fandom, Inc., n.d.). He currently streams on YouTube.com two nights a week, with Sunday nights featuring the game he covers in this video, Grand Theft Auto Online, otherwise known as GTA Online (YouTube, 2015). He has an active Twitter account with over 38k followers (Patrick, n.d.), a Patreon community with almost 500 members (Patrick, 2018), and a private Discord that requires an invite to join. Grand Theft Auto Online is "a

dynamic and ever-evolving universe for up to 30 players" (Rockstar Games, n.d.) where players meet up with their "crew" in the city of Los Santos to complete missions and jobs together.

Grand Theft Auto Online has an active player base with an average of 7.9 million active players a day across five different gaming platforms (*Grand Theft Auto V Live Player Count and Statistics*. ActivePlayer.io, n.d.).

In this video, Patrick shares his top experiences for making friends in Grand Theft Auto Online. Some of these suggestions include offering in-game assistance and explaining why it is crucial not to judge players by their levels. As a multi-game streamer, he occasionally compares and contrasts his experiences in Grand Theft Auto Online with those in other games, such as Call of Duty.

GTA Online Top 5 Tips To Meet And Make Reliable Friends

Video Publication Channel: TheProfessional

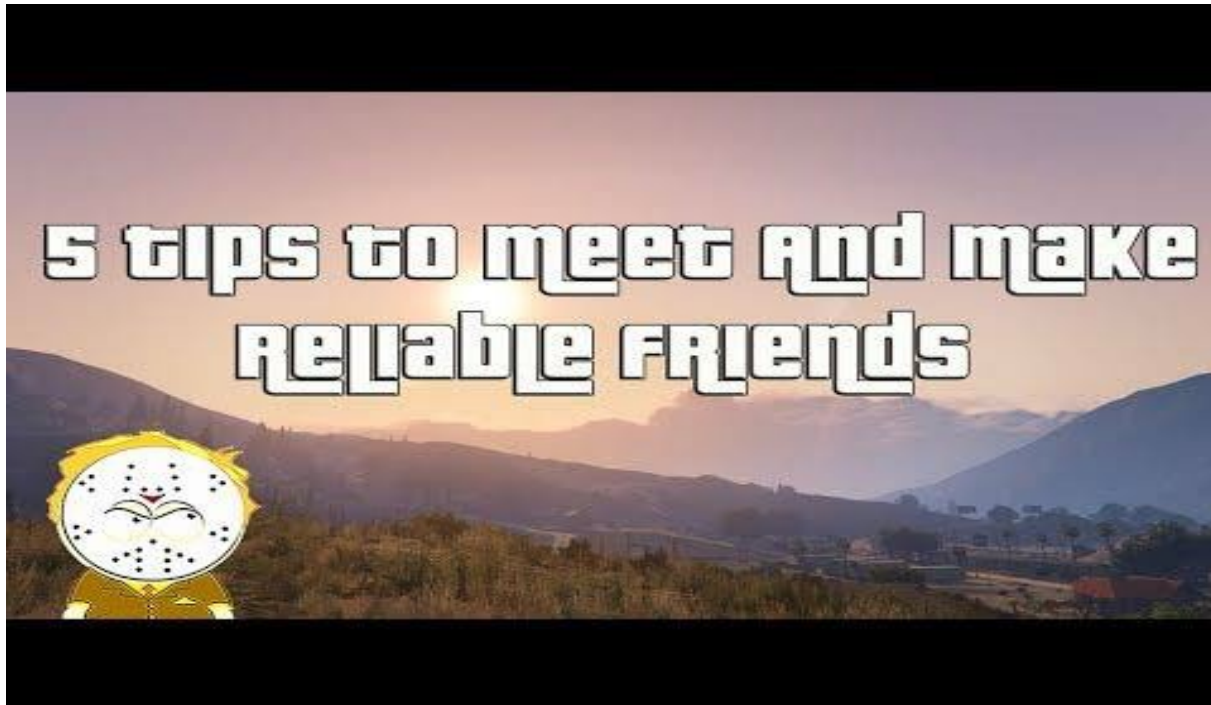
Video Publication Date: July 4th, 2019

Channel Subscribers when video was found: 1.1 million

Number of Video Views when video was found: 197k

Video Length: 10 minutes 1 second

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7ihP2RkQYI>



Suggestion Number*	Suggested Action and/or Experience Had	Reason for Suggesting Action or Experience (How it can affect an online relationship)
1	Look for people with microphones	While not necessary, it's easier than messaging and may be needed in harder situations and makes coordination easier in live situations.
2	Don't judge people by level	Some people will not play with people who are not their level. New players need to learn and just because they are new doesn't mean they will not be competent. You might find new players that make great players and friends. Give people a chance

3	Watch people's actions	Play in a public lobby with other players and watch how they act around other players to get an idea of the type of player they are in game. If you end up hanging around with players who are toxic to other players, people may assume you are like them.
4	Join a community or Crew	If you find a group of players who are like minded and willing to help each other, you can make a good group of friends in the process.
5	Offer help to others	When you offer to help other they often offer to give help in return.

**This video is a "countdown" so the numbers in the video are reversed compared to the table*

While many of the actions taken and experiences had in this video are very game-specific to Grand Theft Auto Online, as they were analyzed, many of them fall into a few general themes. But, are times throughout the video that Patrick talks about similar interactions or experiences in other online games he plays. The following sections will outline the general themes identified for the actions done or interactions had, along with the rationale for why the suggestions fall where they do and their importance in making friends. Some interactions or experiences can fall into several different themes.

Be Social

For this theme, there are two suggestions in this video. First is suggestion one with "Look for people with microphones," and the second is suggestion four with "Join a community or crew." The reason he suggests finding people with microphones is important in GTA Online is that, when doing jobs with other players, communication is key to coordinating actions. He

explains that there are plenty of good people in the game without headsets to chat on, but often, the speed at which players can communicate is key to winning. Yes, players can communicate through text chat in-game, but talking is the fastest and most efficient way to communicate in real-time and can often lead to winning games against larger groups or more complex missions. He mentions that some players might worry about being mocked for their voices, but he has experienced this in the past and found those players to be toxic, so he advises moving on and blocking them.

Through good communication, a player may be invited to join another player's crew or community. Within these crews or communities, players often help each other progress in the game. Often, when a player finds a crew that they connect with, it helps them make friends more easily because it is a regular group of people who are playing together reliably and often. Most crews and communities have rules and regulations that keep toxic players, griefers, and hackers out, ensuring everyone involved has the best time most fairly. He even goes into specifics about how he and his crew and community help each other out in specific game situations.

Be Kind

This theme covers two of the suggestions in the video, suggestions two and five. Suggestions two says that one should not judge a player by their level. Patrick's reasoning is that level does not necessarily equate to skill in the game. He states that some players will refuse to play with lower-level players. One reason he gives for playing with lower-level players is that the higher-level players can teach them how to play correctly. While not a specific suggestion, this touches on "Sharing" themes. He then recounts a story about assisting a low-level player with a game component and being paired with a high-level player through the matchmaker to provide additional support. The low-level player took suggestions, listened to coaching, and did

not die once throughout the mission. On the other hand, the high-level player ran in by themselves, died several times, and caused them to lose the mission, which required restarting. He states that low-level players are easier to make friends with because they appreciate the help and advice, and they are looking for people to play with, making them more open to repeated play.

The second portion of this suggestion explains how the judgment can go the other way as well. Many lower-level players fear higher-level players because they often get attacked by them in-game. Additionally, extremely high-level players sometimes use mods or other illegal methods to reach those extremely high levels.

Overall, Patrick advises against limiting interactions with other players based solely on their levels, as it is unknown how skillful, helpful, or enjoyable they can be to play with. The second suggestion that falls under "be kind" is to offer help to others, number five. The basis of making friends through this approach is that, often, when help is given to others, they may offer help in return. He says that when he is looking for things to do while playing, he will find players who are by themselves and ask if they need help with any part of the game. If they do, he will help them out and, once they are finished, they will usually ask if he needs help in return. He states that the most significant number of friends on his friend list have been made this way. He could only recall one instance from his years of playing where he helped someone out, only to discover that the person was a griefer who intentionally destroyed some of his in-game items.

While not directly tied to this theme, Patrick does make suggestion three which is "watch people's actions." Grand Theft Auto Online is a game where teaming up with the wrong people can, and will, go wrong if precautions are not taken. He suggests following or playing with other players on random things for thirty minutes to an hour to get an idea of what kind of player they

are. If they are running around and destroying things in-game or are just being toxic in general, do not associate with them because others will assume you are like them. So, while offering help to others can be a good thing, before adding them to a friend list, watch or play with them for a while to see exactly what kind of person they are online.

Share

In the experiences that Patrick shares in his video, he focuses on sharing knowledge of the game and a little about sharing in-game resources. In suggestion two (do not judge people by level), he explains how joining a new or low-level player can help you make a new friend. By sharing in-game experiences or knowledge of specific scenarios or heists, a player can create a good starting point for a new friendship. This carries over into suggestion four (join a community or crew), where he discusses sharing game knowledge and in-game resources with other players in your crew, which can foster a sense of community, belonging, and trust within the crew.

Be Helpful

This, once again, covers suggestions two (do not judge people by their level) and four (join a community or crew), but is about some other experiences that TheProfessional has had. He discusses how, while a player may not get any rewards or benefit from helping out a new player or a player in their crew, helping out other players is extremely important when growing friendships within the community. He explains that helping a new player on a heist or job they have already done is a great way to start a new friendship. He then explains that helping others in his crew with jobs or heists that need to be done may not directly benefit them, but it will earn him the goodwill of other players who may help when he needs it. So, by helping other players, it helps to foster new friendships but also grow current ones.

Ebbnflow

Ebbnflow is a World of Warcraft content creator who has been uploading videos in bunches since April 29th, 2008 (YouTube.com, 2008). While almost all of his 320 videos are based within World of Warcraft and his love of the Druid class of character, he will sporadically upload a “real life” video where he gives his subscribers updates on his life or shares things he is passionate about outside of the game. These revolve mostly around his pets, camping, and outdoor activities.

World of Warcraft, also known as “WoW”, was released on November 23rd, 2004 (*Server population & player count. MMO Populations, 2004*) and is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game that “you play a powerful hero who fights towering monsters, delves perilous dungeons, defends the world of Azeroth against all threats, and much more” (*Getting started on your free trial - WOW. World of Warcraft, n.d.*). Since its release, World of Warcraft has had ten major expansions (*WOW expansions list -- all current and new expansions. ONE Esports, 2024*). It is one of the primary reasons that, even now, World of Warcraft has an estimated 164 million players with an average active player count of almost 1.2 million players a day (*Server population & player count. MMO Populations,2019*).

Ebbnflow released this video at the time he did because of an announcement made by Blizzard, the game development company. This video was released before the re-release of the original version of World of Warcraft. Many older players disliked the changes made to the core game by the expansions, prompting Blizzard to launch servers with the original game, known as “Classic World of Warcraft,” on August 26th, 2019 (*Server population & player count. MMO Populations,2019*). The re-release brought back a large number of players who had become dissatisfied with the changes to the game they originally played by the expansions.

This video serves as a “how-to” guide for both returning and new players who have never experienced the game in its original form, with a focus on making friends as they return to the re-release of the old game. In this video, Ebbnflow shares his experiences on what is important when trying to make friends in the original version of the game, and how it can be different from the newer versions of World of Warcraft. He often tells of his experiences of meeting and forming friendships with players that do not even speak the same language, forming friendships, or at least keeping tabs on, players who may be playing more “evil” rolls within the world, and how finding players who fill certain rolls within his guild can be helpful with forming friend relationships with new or returning players or fostering old friendships. Individual players are often named when he explains specific actions or interactions as well.

How to make friends in Classic WoW!

Video Publication Channel: Ebbnflow

Video Publication Date: May 7th, 2019

Number of Channel Subscribers when video was found: 17.6k

Number of Video Views when video was found: 12k

Video Length: 10 minutes 21 seconds

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7L7rKvWNQM>



Suggestion Number*	Suggested Action and/or Experience Had	Reason for Suggesting Action or Experience (How it can affect an online relationship)
“Mini tip”	Just let it happen	Players in-game usually have a lot going in while they are playing. Don’t try and force a friendship. Let it happen naturally.
1	Be that guy or girl	In a roll playing game, decide what character you want to portray and lean into it. Good or bad. Mage, healer, tank, etc. Stand out in the community.
2	Be a team player	Things like bringing consumables to share with your group, helping the leader find players to fill slots, or complimenting on a job well done can

		often have good repercussions for you with players you play with.
3	Be helpful	By doing things like helping lower-level players, give a buff as you run by, or helping run a dungeon that you don't need anything from, you will be remembered by those other players and often get repaid in kind down the road.
4	Kindness is key	While skill and performance go a long way, you will be remembered on how you treat other players. Unlike other games, you can't change your name so you will be remembered by your actions.
5	Be remembered	Doing things like accepting random group invites, adding people to your friend list, giving compliments and sharing items when a job is well done, offer services, and being courteous when help is giving goes a long way to making friends in game.

**This video is a "countdown" so the numbers in the video are reversed compared to the table*

While many of the actions taken and experiences had in this video are very game-specific to World of Warcraft, as they were analyzed, many of them fall into a few general themes. The following sections will outline the general themes identified for the actions done or interactions had, along with the rationale for why the suggestions fall where they do and their importance in making friends. Some interactions or experiences can fall into several different themes.

Participate in the World

This theme shows up in several of the suggestions Ebbnflow makes. In the first suggestion, “Be that guy or girl”, he suggests that, as a player interacts with other players, they are in a role-playing game and should lean into it. That does not mean they have to be liked. They should strive to fulfill a role that makes the world more enjoyable and engaging for everyone to interact with. He mentions that the world needs players of all kinds, and most of the people on his friends list are those who stand out and fill specific roles. He has his players, whom he goes to for various jobs, players that fill specific party slots for raiding and adventuring, and he even includes the “trolls” and “griefers,” as he believes in the saying, “keep his friends close but his enemies closer.” It does not matter what kind of role they fill; they do it as best as they can, and because of that, they usually chat or adventure together fairly often.

This theme is also touched on, but in similar ways, in suggestions three and five. In both “Be helpful” and “Be remembered”, Ebbnflow suggests doing things like accepting random party invites, offering any job services that the player may have, or running dungeons for players even if they do not need anything from them. In other words, participate in different parts of the game with other gamers, even if it may not be a direct benefit to themselves. Those other players may add them to their friend list simply because they are sociable and helpful, and they may become a regular chat and adventure partner.

He ends the video with an overview of how and why it is so easy to make friends in Classic World of Warcraft. The game was created and is centred around player and community interaction, making it a great place to make friends easily.

Share

Because parts of World of Warcraft can be such a team-based game, Ebbnflow describes in most of his suggestions how sharing things can lead to making friends easily. Sharing loot from dungeons with players who may need it is a great way to show others that a player is trustworthy when it comes to doing raids together. Sharing knowledge with players who are just starting or starting a new character, if they have more experience in it. Casting a random buff spell on a player as they run by to help that player out. Sharing items before or during adventuring so that everyone might have an easier time throughout the adventure. For this, he shares his own story about how he was regularly invited, as an English-speaking player, to an all-Chinese group of regular players simply because the first time he accepted their random invite to play, he gave out a bunch of extra consumables (single use items players use to give their character a buff to stats) he had to the other players. It was so helpful that, even though they could not communicate with each other through speech, he would play with them several times a week, and he still considers them friends.

Be Kind

This is another theme that is touched on in most of Ebbnflow's suggestions and then still makes it a suggestion of its own, suggestion four. Throughout the video, he emphasizes that when a player receives help, they should always express gratitude or appreciation for the assistance. Whether it is help in the form of items, spell buffs, help completing a mission or raid, job services, or anything else, show appreciation with a kind word, gesture, or monetary tip. Ebbnflow tells his own in-game bias as a spell user of prioritizing those who say "Thank you" to him for the help he gives to them.

This also includes giving out words of encouragement or a compliment for a job well done within the game. If a player is doing or has done their job exceptionally well while

adventuring, ensure they receive feedback on their performance and encouragement to keep up the good work.

He says that this is so important because, unlike many other games, a player cannot change their account name. If a player engages in bad behaviour, such as being toxic, “throwing” (purposefully trying to lose), or acting rudely, they will most likely be remembered by everyone else on the server and most likely be avoided. While there is some level of anonymity to hide behind, a player cannot just change their name or change their character on a whim to try to hide from their previous actions.

Be Helpful

Ebbnflow provides examples in a couple of his suggestions about interactions that have helped make new friends. In the suggestion “Be Helpful” (number three), he tells of his experiences of helping low-level players through dungeons. He also touches on this in suggestion two (Be a Team Player) when helping a guild leader sort and recruit people for a raid, as well as making extra potions, consumables, or power-up items before the raid to share with others in the group. He also mentions in several places about giving random buffs to players as they run past, helping them with whatever they are doing. These actions are often returned in kind when the player needs help

Be Unique/Memorable

As World of Warcraft is a Role-playing Game, Ebbnflow suggests two approaches that explore this theme. In suggestion one (be that guy or girl), he talks about how, whatever role a player decides to take, they should portray it the best they can and to lean into whatever characteristics that character may have. To go along with that, suggestion five (be remembered)

discusses ways to act, as a player, so that other players remember it and may call upon the player when that specific thing is needed.

Regarding suggestion one, Ebbnflow notes that every World of Warcraft server requires rolls of every kind. He describes the “ninja-looting scumbag”, the “Portal Mage in Kargath [a location within World of Warcraft]”, or “the chat troll in general chat.” It does not matter if it is good or bad; be “that guy” in whatever role a player takes on. He even describes that most of the people on his friends list are not good or bad but people who stand out in different ways.

Furthermore, for suggestion five (be remembered), he expands on why “being that guy or girl” is so important. One major thing in World of Warcraft: Classic is that a player cannot change their username, unlike many other games. Therefore, a player's fulfillment of their chosen role on the server and their treatment of other players can spread and be remembered by the other players on the server.

Comparative Thematic Analysis

While these five video games offer distinct online experiences for gamers, they share common themes that video creators believe facilitate the friend-making process. While we do not know how the individual creators chose the suggestions they did, we do know that, for them and their experiences, what ended up in their videos is what they found to be some of the most important actions and types of interactions to make friends the easiest.

Before exploring what is important to making new peers online, it is essential to highlight a word that frequently appears in these videos as the opposite of kindness: “toxic.” It was often associated with things like hacking, griefing, and just being obnoxious overall. Every video had some examples of this. In Minecraft, do not kill or prank other players. In VRChat, do not use explicit avatars or make fun of others. In Fortnite, do not play loud music or scream over the

microphones. In Grand Theft Auto Online, do not throw missions by not working with the team. In World of Warcraft Classic, do not try to force things.

This does not mean that, within the context of the type of game, something seen as bad in one game will necessarily be bad in another. Context is key and knowing when and where specific actions are appropriate is crucial. This is not only about making friends but also about avoiding actions that might push people away and lead to being perceived as a troll or griefer.

The only theme that crosses all five videos is "Be Kind." Even in competitive games like Fortnite Battle Royale, where players compete to be the last one alive, or in Grand Theft Auto Online, where many objectives involve criminal activities that can damage or destroy other players' progress, being kind to other players is a key suggestion for making friends. There does seem to be a difference between the types of games and how some of these actions are taken on, whether they are seen as unkind or "toxic" to the other players involved. Destroying a build or killing another player in Grand Theft Auto Online is seen completely differently than doing the same actions in a game like Minecraft and knowing the differences in expectations is key to being able to make new friends.

Some actions are consistently viewed as "kind" across all five game communities, according to these creators. Giving compliments for jobs well done, whether it is a heist in Grand Theft Auto Online or a successful dungeon raid in World of Warcraft, is always seen as a kind gesture and an important thing to do to make friends. The same applies to compliments on a new build a player might finish in Minecraft or the personalization they may do to their avatar in VRChat. Compliments given show other players that they are valued within the community and that their participation in it is welcome.

The next most suggested themes that showed up across all five videos is to "Be Social" and "Participate in the World." These often go hand in hand in video these video game spaces. Video gaming is an active use of time. Not only are the games interactive, but the five video games represented are designed with social interaction and co-operation in mind to help users get the most out of them. Except for Minecraft, the video games covered in these videos do not even have a solo or single-player mode. While Grand Theft Auto Online is built from Grand Theft Auto V, the two gaming experiences are entirely different. A player can play Fortnite by themselves, but all game modes require being online to compete against or work with other players. Whole sections of some of these games cannot even be accessed without a group of players. Building worlds in VRChat is meant to bring like-minded people together to play and share interests. Cid specifically mentions how doing everything together in VRChat can make players become friends quickly.

Being social is key to making friends in these games because social interaction is built into these games for players to succeed. The one outlier here is Minecraft, but once online connectivity was added to the game, players found it extremely fun to team up to survive and build together. Now there are entire servers based on the creativity of players and how they interact. The gamers in any of these specific games have already spent the money on a gaming console, personal computer, or handheld device. They have also spent the money on purchasing the games they are interested in playing. There is already a common interest of just being in the game, making socializing about it that much easier. Being in one of these games sets a common ground for conversations. It sets common goals for interactions. Many have their own in-game economies, words, and languages, as well as general expectations for players based on the classes, characters, skins, avatars, crews, guilds, jobs, and other selectable variables they choose.

Participation in and being social are made an integral part of being successful within most of these games. By doing so, partnered with being kind, these games are set up to make peer relationships easy to form.

While the theme of "Sharing" could easily fall under the umbrella theme of "Be Kind," the specifics of giving items and materials to other players was distinct enough because it did only showed up in two of the videos and seems to be more specific to the games that crafting and dungeon exploring seemed to be significant aspects of the game. There were also other reasons for doing so besides a general "it is nice to share with friends" perspective. Sharing showed up in the videos about Minecraft and World of Warcraft Classic. In both videos, the suggestion was aimed at two specific instances. First was sharing loot from chests at the end of dungeons. In both games, it was not so much a "kind" gesture as something fair and used to build trust between players who may want to do more adventuring together. The idea behind it was twofold. First was the short-sighted, "We all worked together to win, so we all deserve part of the prize." Second, the approach was more long-term: "If we share the loot with those whom it will benefit the most, they will in turn help us get things we need and will make it easier because they will be more optimized."

The second reason sharing was suggested was to make another player's game easier, as a player might have an excess of something. Whether that thing is extra diamonds or food for pets in Minecraft with a player, sharing the extra potions or food crafted while levelling up jobs in World of Warcraft Classic, or sharing knowledge of how a mission or heist works with a lower level player in Grand Theft Auto Online, sharing things to make another's game easier is a straightforward way to start a relationship with another player and potentially make a friend. There was usually a small caveat given by the video creators that pointed out, while it may seem

selfless to give away extra items, there is always the possibility of it coming back around to help in the long run if they were looking for something. When one player owes something to the other, it creates an open door for continued interaction and vice versa. The continued interactions are one way to lead to a friendship.

“Be Helpful” show up in three of the videos and although, it could have been combined with other themes, such as "Sharing" or “Being Kind”, the nuanced differences between them and their potential broader themes warranted its own. Aspects of this theme appeared in other videos but was not given its listing as a numbered item.

The theme of "Be Helpful" appeared in Sub's World's Minecraft video, in Ebbnflows World of Warcraft: Classic video and in TheProfessional's Grand Theft Auto Online video, but aspects of it were also present in the other videos as well. While sharing does have a significant overlap with being helpful, the way they were carried out was different. While sharing was item-based, being helpful was more action-based. Specific examples given by Sub's World were actions like "Defend other players from bad players, griefers, and hackers!" and "Harvest and Replant their crops." Ebbnflow mentions helping the leader of a raid look for players to fill open slots in the raid or just giving a random player a mage buff when running by in the open world in World of Warcraft Classic. TheProfessional discusses assisting players with missions he has already completed, which will yield no rewards in Grand Theft Auto Online. It is not as if these actions have no benefit to the player performing them. While it is highly beneficial to the player who is receiving the help, it raises the reputation of the helper in the community as being a good player and someone who can be counted on. That reputation will likely spread to others, and in turn, may be helpful to them down the road if they ever need something. Not to mention, sometimes it just feels good to help someone.

Two conflicting themes specific to Cid's VRChat video, were "Be Who You Are" and "Be Who You Want To Be." The reason it showed up this video specifically is simply because of the type of game it is. The player creates an avatar to be whoever or whatever they want to be and then proceeds to interact as said created avatar. They even tell the story about how their first avatar did not feel right, and other players could tell they were uncomfortable in it, so they changed. While they have a deeper voice, they felt more at ease in an anime girl's avatar, and other players could sense this, making it easier to form friendships. They then follow it up with the suggestion "Fake it 'til you make it" and this is where I believe that it does have some overlaps with other games, specifically World of Warcraft: Classic. Both of these games have a role-playing aspect to them. In the case of VRChat, a player embodies an avatar with virtual reality equipment, while in World of Warcraft: Classic, they control an avatar with a mouse and keyboard. Both video creators suggest finding an avatar, a job, or a role that one is most comfortable in and leaning into it. One distinction they both make is that "yourself" does not mean "real." Many players get into these games to explore themselves. They may use role-playing games to discover their true selves and who they feel most comfortable being. By being in the virtual game world, they may be practicing how to act or who they want to be in the "real world." For some, it may be the only chance they get to be comfortable in their own "skin." Cid uses the example of, within VRChat, players can spend countless hours and thousands of dollars tweaking and creating their in-game avatar so that it exactly expresses who they are and how they feel or want to feel. Ebbnflow mentions how some players within World of Warcraft have a character that they lean into playing "a ninja-looting scumbag", a helpful mage, or the general chat troll; those people are remembered for the character they play within the world. With the role-playing aspect in both of these games and the conflict it can bring, once that internal conflict

of how they are going to play, they can then “Express Themselves.” Now, this can be influenced by the game's limitations and the story of each video game, which serves as a constant outside influence on how players express themselves. This is why being "bad" in video game spaces is not necessarily a bad thing, but often necessary.

So, once again, being "yourself" does not necessarily mean being who the player is in the real world. The theme, after being explained, is more of "express who you want to be" while in the online gaming world or community. Some players choose to be much like they are in the real world, while others take the chance to express things that they may not feel comfortable with or even able to in the real world. By doing so, they all end up attracting others who want to interact with them for who they are presenting online and, therefore, making friends who like them for who they are.

The final two themes that stem from the "Express Yourself" theme are the themes of "Be Creative" and "Be Unique/Memorable." Once a player decides how they are going to express themselves in-game and become comfortable within the space, they can then begin showing the other players what makes them "them." Whether that means throwing themselves entirely into the role-playing aspect of a game, being a "go-to" person when it comes to a particular aspect of a game, or sharing their offline creativity and hobbies with others in-game, several of the content creators think that doing things that make a player stand out in-game is important to making friends or growing online friendships. Sub's World suggests setting up a shop or becoming a good Redstoner in Minecraft as ways to get people to keep looking for you. Cid mentions sharing offline talents like art, music, or other special skills with others in VR Chat, which makes a player memorable to others. Ebbnflow discusses how fully embracing a role within the World of Warcraft world helps people remember a player. Any way a player can express their specific

interests and share them with others is a great way to connect with other players and become friends.

Normative Gamer Position

Marek Sergot (1998) defines a normative position as the attempt to formalize general actions between people and the subsequent effects those actions have on the people involved. What these five content creators are doing by listing actions and interactions they have had and then explaining the effects they can have on the ability to make friends online is trying to set forth a normative position for gamers in online gaming communities. In these videos, they describe interactions with other online gamers and discuss whether those actions have positive or negative effects on starting or growing a peer relationship.

As with interactions in the real world, some of the interactions described by these creators are game-specific or can be situational (Lewin, 1976) within a game. In these cases, the "norm" of the online gaming community may be at odds with the overall online gaming system because of narrative or expectations within the individual game or set forth by a specific "quest" within the game. An example of this difference between games is evident in Minecraft, where killing another player is generally frowned upon, whereas in Fortnite's Battle Royale, being the last surviving of 100 players (and killing as many as possible) is the game's objective. A follow-up example would be that, within Minecraft, killing another player or destroying builds is generally frowned upon, but in specific game modes (such as Cake Wars), killing other players and destroying their Cake is how you win.

By setting up and defining norms in both the online world and individual gaming spaces, a positive gaming position is established, which in turn establishes its opposite. What Reynolds (2015) calls a "contrastive challenge" (p.312) is what gamers could call those who do not adhere

to what the individual gaming community has set up as the appropriate norm. Those gamers who do not fit into the norm already have terms used earlier in this research. Those labelled as "griefers", "hackers", and "trolls" do not follow the social norms decided on by the individual community. However, even these have exceptions, as described by Ebbnflow (2019), when players fulfill a role within a role-playing community.

Limitations

“OBJECTION!!!” - Various, Pheonix Wright: Ace Attorney

The themes found within the videos and the way the suggested actions or interactions were placed in them from the videos are by no means the only correct or concrete way of grouping them (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Another researcher may or may not find that other groups and themes could be extrapolated or may emerge in the future from the suggestions that were presented in these videos (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). The overlap between some of the suggestions in the videos and the themes provides ample room for interpretation by other researchers to follow up on. Another limitation is that, with this being such a limited look into how potential peer relationships form in online spaces, there is a minimal amount of data presented to make generalizations for online gaming spaces as a whole (Hackshaw, 2008). The reason is that, even among the five games presented in this research, there are subtle differences in the expectations and experiences of these gamers. Suppose someone could count the number of active video games today. In that case, there are possibly thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of online gaming communities out there that correspond to them that can be researched, compared, and contrasted to get a fuller picture of what may and may not work within them.

One last limitation was time. With this being a Master's Thesis, it had to be completed on a timetable that, at times, made further research or a more profound understanding of some of the introduced topics impossible to explore simply because of the time constraints on finishing within the allotted time of the program (Conte, et al., 2016). My first thesis was unable continue past ethics after nine months of work as the scope grew too large and some survey questions may have caused possible undue stress to the youth answering them, so it was abandoned, and a new thesis idea was required. Due to the limited time available after that, decisions were made that eliminated specific subjects and avoided other topics to stay within the program's timeframe. The MSVU faculty strike from January until March of 2024 (Patil, 2024) put further time constraints on the limited time that was left.

Chapter 4: Data and Results

“Well done. Here come the test results: “You are a terrible person.” That’s what it says: A horrible person. We weren’t even testing for that.” - GLaDOS, Portal 2

When it comes to answering the question "How do youth form peer relationships in online gaming communities?", while there are some key differences, finding peers in online gaming spaces works a lot like making friends in offline spaces. One difficulty when trying to compare the two is that, unlike in online spaces like YouTube, where youth will often create their own content, lists, and speak with their own agency, therefore telling their own experiences and ideas, most published research I was able to find was completed by adults, thereby relegating the actual voices of the youth involved to being used as data. To compare offline and online friend-making processes, many of the themes identified in this research can also be found as suggestions or ideas in research done by others about making friends in offline places as well.

One theme that emerges in peer relationship building research is the importance of finding common interests and/or common places to be. The basis of this is that for a peer relationship to form, those forming the relationship need to be in some close proximity to each other and have some common interest in being in that location. Marmaros and Sacerdote (2006) describe some examples of these locations, such as where an individual may live (e.g., neighbourhood or dorm), the school they attend, the year they graduate, the job they work, and even the email service or Instant Messaging software they use. Some interests they point out include topics such as race, athletics, Greek organizations, class and exam scores, familial backgrounds, and participants' origins. Neale and Brown (2015) use the example of friendships that form in hostels, with the shared common interest being drug and alcohol use. Kennedy-

Moore and McLaughlin (2017) even cover both topics in their book *Growing Friendships* by giving suggestions on how to blend in with new groups of kids in not only different places like at school or the swimming pool but also the do's and don'ts of making new friends depending on whether the shared interest is with a single other person or if it is a group of people. They also delve into the specifics of whether these interests have rules or not.

While not outwardly stated in any of the videos used in this research, it could be implied by the fact that the gamers in these online gaming spaces are actively choosing to be in these online places, often paying, not only for the game in the case of games like Minecraft or Grand Theft Auto Online (both around \$30) but often pay monthly subscription fees to be able to continue to play them after their initial purchase like World of Warcraft (\$50 initial purchase with at \$12.99 monthly fee to play) (*World of Warcraft: Subscription –world of warcraft*, Battle.net, n.d.-b). Purchasing or downloading the game to access the online spaces provided by the creators gives gamers the proximity to each other that something like a college dorm floor or a shared hostel would give to those forming offline peer relationships. Continuing to log back in and play repeatedly lays the foundation of having a common interest for online peers, much like discussing athletics and grades or partaking in drugs or alcohol would have for those forming offline peer relationships. By not only making their videos about specific games and the online spaces they are played in, but also by taking the time to create these videos for others in their community to try and foster peer relationships, the implication of close proximity and shared common interest can be implied through the existence and publication of said videos.

Be Social and Participate in the World

"You must gather your party before venturing forth..." - Narrator, Baldur's Gate.

The two themes most explicitly expressed by all five video creators were that of "Be Social" and "Participate in the World." Both will be covered in this section because they often go hand in hand with each other. Each creator provides at least one of each, if not multiple, ways to accomplish both. Sub's World suggests ways of being social in Minecraft, such as "Find another surviving group" and "Join in with relevant group discussions," and participating in the world by starting online activities, like "Throw a party" or "Start a Shop or Business!" (Sub's World, 2019). Cid suggests things like "Initiate the Conversations" and "Try activities" in VRChat (Cid from VRChat, 2022). Ebbnflow and HeyItsCameron both suggest against going overboard or being too pushy when socializing with other players so as not to push other players away and let the friendships form naturally (Ebbnflow, 2019; HeyItsCameron, 2021). TheProfessional suggests not only finding players with microphones to communicate in real time but also joining a crew to do online activities together once a good group of like-minded players is found (TheProfessional, 2019). These suggestions align with what other researchers have found to help with making friends offline as well.

This same ideology of being social to make friends and participating in activities with them has been shown time and time again to be a leading factor in how youth form peer relationships offline as well. One aspect that can make this easier for youth in online gaming spaces is that the players have anonymity behind the avatars they play as. While a player may not create their avatar to look like them, and in some cases that is impossible as a "human" may not even be a playable, in-game race, the player may feel more comfortable with their in game persona (see: Cid from VRChat) and be more comfortable taking the initial steps to initiating conversation and being more social online. By using an avatar to communicate and participate, personal indicators such as sex, age, race, location, disability, sexual preference, and other

factors that can be used as discriminatory in face-to-face interactions may not be factors in the initial relationship-building process online like they could be offline.

Participation in activities and social inclusion are considered key indicators and issues when it comes to building peer relationships around the world. This has been found time and time again for youth around the world no matter the country or language (Schwittek & König, 2024; Ziersch et al., 2023), physical ability (Bossaert et al., 2013; Gerhardt et al., 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2021; Koster et al., 2009), race (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006; Parker et al., 2015), age (Kennedy-Moore & McLaughlin, 2017; Neale & Brown, 2015), and sex (Lenton & Webber, 2006). There are many cross sections within all these groups, but, as stated before, the use of an avatar and in-game tools often make them moot when first meetings and interactions are attempted, and as subsequent meetups and activities are easier for online players to accommodate.

Some examples of the factors mentioned above that can be mitigated and, therefore, are easier for players to initiate interactions around are as follows:

Sex, Age, and Race

Unfortunately, there is still much sexism (Wilder, 2024), racism (TaeHyuk Keum & Hearn, 2022), and agism (Vale Costa et al., 2019) in online spaces. The ability to use any avatar a player wants within what a game allows can make it easier for a player to express or hide themselves to others, but can be a point of reference when initiating a conversation with other players for the first time. For players with anxiety, the absence of these factors can help not only bolster their confidence to initiate a conversation or join in an activity with others. However, it can also help them find other like-minded players to initiate those interactions with. Female players (Fox & Tang, 2014) or players who are a minority (Wells et al., 2025) on a server are

often the targets of harassment. Younger or older players are avoided because they are seen as hindrances to a team, as they are not the prime gaming age (Shmatenko, 2024). By using an avatar in a game, these factors are non-issues if the player decides not to give the information. The peer relationships are built around actual skill in-game and whether the other players are fun to interact with. This is at odds with most offline peer relationship building, where youth see someone before initiating a conversation or joining an activity, and bring their own preconceived biases about that person with them.

Country or Language

Since many online games are open to players worldwide, there is always the chance that a player will run into other players from all over the world. Players are typically placed in their local servers, allowing them to interact with other local players. However, most games offer the option to move to or change servers, giving players the flexibility to play on servers anywhere around the world. Many games and even some gaming systems have included ways for players from anywhere in the world and in multiple languages to start conversations or join intense gaming sessions and objectives without even having to know more than their native language. Games like Final Fantasy XI and Final Fantasy XIV have the same auto-translate feature but are specific to the in-game and can be played on multiple systems (*Auto-translate*. Auto-Translate - Final Fantasy XIV Online Wiki - FFXIV / FF14 Online Community Wiki and Guide, n.d.; *Using the auto-translate feature*. FINAL FANTASY XI Official Web Site, n.d.). Even games that have no in game text chat at all, like Elden Ring, have made it possible for players from around the world to communicate by adding, and continuing to add, countless in-game gestures to the point that players have come up with their own, in-game gesture patterns to create a language players around the world understand (*Gestures*. Elden Ring Wiki, n.d.). These are even options beyond

the usual in-game voice chat options. By providing players with multiple entry points and conversation starters, even shy players or those from diverse backgrounds can engage in conversations, participate in the game, and form online friendships. This is another reason why information such as age, race, and sex can be non-influential factors, as players have the option to communicate and participate anonymously, thereby avoiding the impact of these factors on other players online.

Physical Ability

This is one area where gaming has made some of its most significant strides in recent years. The gaming industry has taken it upon itself to make gaming as inclusive as possible in many different ways to expand its player base. Oftentimes, youth with disabilities have a harder time making peer relationships or participating in activities with friends because of physical limitations of various kinds (Bossaert et al., 2013; Gerhardt et al., 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2021; Koster et al., 2009). This does not mean that these peer relationships and ongoing activities are not just as meaningful to them as any other able-bodied youth (Hook & Cook, 1979; Worth, 2013 . Video games have tried to bridge this gap in many ways so that physical limitations are minimized or altogether erased in the online gaming space they provide. Games like Forza Motorsports, Mortal Kombat, and countless others have added real-time audio description, low-light aura indicators, full-screen reader support, and text and subtitled customizations for low vision and blind players (Stoner, 2024). Preset colour palette swaps have become a standard, as seen in Overwatch 2, for those who are colorblind (*Using color blind mode*. Blizzard Support. (n.d.). A large number of games now come with support for mouse, keyboard, and several different types of controllers on top of having preset controller mapping for left, right, and players who may only have one hand.

Along with this, there are settings for who may not be able to physically do quick time events to either skip them altogether or lower the number of buttons pressed to do quick combos in games like Street Fighter 6 (Dale, 2023; Stoner, 2024). Marvel's Spiderman 2 and Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, which are quick-paced action-adventure games, have added Slow Modes that allow the player to slow down the action and movement during fast-paced gaming sections to allow for more time for button inputs (Stoner, 2024). This has not only been done for physical disabilities but for mental disabilities and trauma survivors as well. Horror games like Dead Space have started adding presets that censor gore video and audio or change the dialogue having to do with traumatic events like suicide for trauma survivors (Murray, 2023; Stoner, 2024). Games like Grounded and Hogwarts Legacy have warnings of spiders and give an "Arachnophobia Mode" that allows the user to dial back details on, completely censor, or change the spiders from the game to other creatures entirely (Taylor, 2024). Finally, for any gamers who want to play with their friends with slower cognitive processing speeds or brain damage, Boulder's Gate 3 allows other party members to control dialog on their friends screen so the player can focus on just playing their character while Super Mario Bros. Wonder allows players to revive other players where they are so infinitely they can all finish the levels together (MacDonald, 2023; Stoner, 2024).

Also included in the social and participation aspects of interacting with new peers, both online and offline, is having the social aptitude to know when to back off or know when something is inappropriate. HeyItsCameron (2021) points out that it is not necessary to constantly scream over the microphone in chat in Fortnite. Ebbnflow (2019) emphasizes the importance of not forcing a friendship and allowing it to develop naturally in World of Warcraft. Sub's World (2019) and Cid from VRChat (2022) both stress the importance of not trolling,

killing, teasing, or pranking others if you want to make friends in Minecraft or VRChat. All of these suggestions are mirrored by Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017) in some way when it comes to making friends offline as well. "Notice stop signals" (p. 30), "Take it slow" (p. 17) and do not be an "octopus friend" (p. 18), "Match the Tone" (p. 74), and "Be a good sport" (p.132) are all suggestions made for making offline friends that copy friend making strategies put forth by the online game creators.

By excluding many identifying factors that are brought to the forefront in face-to-face, offline meetings, researchers have the opportunity to reexamine the current understanding of homophily and its significance in peer relationship building. The current definition provided by researchers like McPherson et al. (2001), Lubbers (2004), Altermatt and Pomerantz (2003), Baerveldt, et al. (2007), Pijl et al (2008), and Schwab et al. (2019) focuses on friendships made by individuals with similar characteristics like age, sex, gender, jobs, school level, race, academic achievements, and even disabilities. With so many of these factors being hidden or non-issues when it comes to interacting in online spaces, the definition of homophily and its importance in peer relationship building may include non-identifying factors like skills, attitude, avatar choice, and a whole slew of new, online-specific factors that transcend physical things already covered by the current definition.

So yes, being social and participating in both online and offline spaces is essential for youth to make new peer relationships and help them grow (Bossaert et al., 2013; Gerhardt et al., 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2021; Koster et al., 2009). While important in both spaces, each has different ways of doing so. The same kind of expectations for conversing with others and participating in activities in their respective spaces are fulfilled in their own unique, yet not too different ways.

Be Kind

"Would you kindly?" - Andrew Ryan, Bioshock.

The other theme that emerged in all the analyzed videos about making friends in online spaces, as well as in much of the research on starting peer relationships offline, is to "Be Kind" to other people. Kindness was one of the highest descriptors given for what youth look for in a friend by both boys and girls (Sprecher & Regan, 2002; Wagner, 2018). All five content creators provide specific, in-game examples of ways to be kind to other players as well. Patrick, "TheProfessional" (2019) suggests that in Grand Theft Auto Online, players should help others when they need it to make new friends, and Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017) suggest the same thing when trying to make new friends on a playground or at the pool. In the case of being kind in VRChat, Cid (2022) covers some dos and don'ts, and several of them line up precisely with what Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017) as well. Both suggest avoiding humour immediately when forming a new peer relationship, as the other person may not share the same sense of humour, and there is a risk of offending them. Both also suggest giving compliments to potential new peers. Cid (2022) suggests complementing the avatar another player is wearing, while Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017) suggest complimenting someone on a well-done picture, their new haircut, or their new clothes. A compliment on a job well done, no matter if it is a new build in Minecraft or the successful completion of a tough raid in World of Warcraft, or the completion of a heist in Grand Theft Auto Online are all equally important to being kind to potential new peers online according to Sub's World (2019), Ebbnflow (2019), and TheProffessional (2019).

Share

"It's dangerous to go alone! Take this." - Old Man, The Legend of Zelda.

Sharing is another theme that both online creators and offline researchers share as part of a successful strategy for forming new peer relationships. While sharing resources and items was suggested by both Ebbnflow (2019) and Sub's World (2019) in both World of Warcraft Classic and Minecraft, there is research that shows sharing goods, services, and skills helps start new peer relationships and can help deepen already established friendships between those involved (Brown, 2022). Sharing can be used in a myriad of different situations offline to make friends. Birch and Billman (1986) discuss the importance of sharing food with friends in pre-schoolers. This was also shown in the research done by both Belackova and Vaccaro (2013) and Neale and Brown (2015) among drug users and the sharing of drugs and alcohol. In both research studies, users identified those who shared substances, resources, gifts, loans, and accommodations as better and more reliable friends than those who did not. Moreover, this sharing is not just limited to physical or digital items. The sharing of knowledge and secrets is also a good way to start and grow peer relationships. TheProfessional (2019), Ebbnflow (2019), and Sub's World (2019) make a point to suggest and share information with new players, sharing their knowledge of how the game works to help build a new friendship with another player. This thought is echoed by offline friendship researchers as well. Bedrov and Gable (2023) emphasize the significance of sharing personal information and secrets among friends, which deepens and strengthens their relationship by expressing trust and closeness. Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017) also stress the importance of sharing with others and ensuring that both the sharer and sharee are comfortable with the amount of sharing done within the timeline of the relationship. Oversharing can be uncomfortable for both parties involved and may hinder the start or growth of a peer relationship.

Be Helpful

"Wake me when you need me..." - Master Chief, Halo 3

As stated in the previous section of this research, "Being helpful" was only outwardly stated by Sub's World (2019); aspects of doing helpful acts appeared in the other videos that were analyzed, and elements of this theme have shown up in research about offline friendships. Specifically, in Sub's World video (2019), his seventh suggestion for making new friends is "Defend players from bad players, griefers, and hackers!". This suggestion is the online equivalent of what is suggested by both Hoffmann et al. (2021) and Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin (2017). Both describe that part of being a good friend is to help out other friends when they are the target of bullying, and even offer some suggestions on how to deal with bullies and griefers when they are encountered. In both cases, part of making, maintaining, and growing friendships both online and off is to help, and in turn be helped, with protections against potential bad situations or people that they may come across.

The five "Expressive" Themes

"Nothing is True, everything is permitted." - Ezio, Assassin's Creed.

The final five themes presented by the online video creators are about self-expression and often have so much overlap, but important enough subtle differences, that they are going to be covered together in this section.

The first choice a gamer needs to make is between the themes of "Be Who You Are" or "Be Who You Want to Be." Cid from VRChat places them both under the idea of "Be Yourself" and goes into further detail about the different possible meanings it can have. The first meaning is to "Be Who You Are" and it can mean to be who you truly are inside (Cid from VRChat, 2022, Kennedy-Moore & McLaughlin, 2017; Whiting & Nash, 2024). In this case, a person is expressing who they are and not hiding aspects of themselves. They are just "being themselves".

The other way this statement can be interpreted is "be who you truly want to be." (Cid from VRChat, 2022). This means that someone should express who they want to be, but cannot because of certain circumstances in their life. Again, this can take many different forms depending on the place and circumstances. The first meaning is often at odds with the second because, while youth frequently feel free to express themselves online, there are often social limitations on how they can act or how they can express themselves to others in person. The first meaning is exactly as it sounds: to be your true self to the fullest extent. Just express yourself and be "you."

The second is different. The perfect example of the dichotomy of these meanings, as put by Brene Brown (2015), is the distinction that:

"Fitting in is one of the greatest barriers to belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, does not require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are." (p. 231-232).

Often, because of social pressure, youth are not able to fully express themselves with offline peers because they can be labelled as weird (Whiting & Nash, 2024) or seen as an outcast by others (Zackariasson, 2014). On the other hand, while online, they are free to act out their fantasies and express who they are inside. This is shown by Cid themselves by their choice to pick an avatar in VRChat that looks nothing like themselves. Their avatar is a different gender and nationality from them, but they feel most comfortable with it. They have made many online friends who share their feelings and express themselves in the same way. The online space that allows Cid to be themselves works much like the specialty schools and the visually impaired students that attend them, which Nancy Worth (2013) studied in *Making friends and fitting in: a social-relational understanding of disability at school*. Many of the visually impaired students

felt most comfortable at their special school, despite others believing that attending a "normal" school would be more beneficial. This was because they were surrounded by others who understood their experiences and could truly express themselves to those around them. So, this shows that there are both online and offline spaces where youth can be their authentic selves, even if they cannot do so around everyone.

Cid (2022), while partially aiming their video at gamers who may be on the shy side, also describes "be who you want to be" in another way. They suggest that the gamers use the online VRChat space to practice actions that they may be too anxious or shy to try with others offline. For instance, since all users start anonymous, the stakes are much lower if someone practices and fails at cold greeting someone, trying a new skill, or even trying out a new persona. In other words, decide who you would like to be offline, practice those skills, techniques, and interactions online so you can become more comfortable with the reactions and consequences, and eventually take those practices into the real world. This might be something someone does with close real-life friends, whom they are comfortable with, as well, to get comfortable with meeting new people.

However, when interpreting "Be yourself", research has shown that online content creators and offline researchers find a significant overlap in how this phrase can be used and interpreted in both online and offline spaces.

Once the decision is made between the first two themes, the other three expressive themes come into play. "Express Yourself", "Be Creative", and "Be Unique/Memorable" can all be achieved, with slight variations in the framing of the word "me". By this, "me" can mean the true gamer or the character the gamer decides to personify.

Expressing oneself in the gaming space allows other gamers to know who they are, what they like, and what they expect from the gaming experience, which is crucial for making friends online. Self-expression in offline spaces is important to making friends as well (Krause, 2010). Krause (2010) explains that self-expression is a defining factor in close friends, and the closer the friends, the more they self-express. Two examples of this self-expression that fall under the “Be Creative” theme are making art or music. Whiteland (2012) found that within art programs, people would cooperate, collaborate, motivate, and share values in playful ways, even in cross-generational classes. This last bit of information is important because gaming communities are very often full of players of all ages 13+. Many of the same findings were found when sharing music with others. Pavlicevic et al. (2014) found that young adults who shared music, in this case as therapy, made them feel more accepted and successful while fostering friendships that were made, not only by the youth, but by their parents as well.

Finally, “Be Unique/Memorable” can be a double-edged sword depending on the circumstances, both in online gaming spaces and in the offline world. This is a more individual and community-focused approach, depending mainly on the social norms set forth by each gaming community. Shai et al. (2017) found that when youth met and started becoming acquainted, the interactions they had could make individuals unique or memorable for both positive and negative reasons. In their study, they found that more competitive interactions while making new friends were less desirable and therefore more memorable for the wrong reasons. This perspective is often viewed negatively in more cooperative gaming communities, as noted by Subs World (2019). However, from a role-playing standpoint, it can be seen as positive, as discussed by Ebbnflow (2019), particularly when fulfilling a role within the world. Again, this goes back to the social norms set forth by the community involved. The term “that guy” is used

by both Ebbnflow (2019) and Cid (2022). What they mean by that is to be the memorable or unique person who fills a space that everyone in that community remembers for doing whatever that thing is well.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Application

It's Super Effective!! - Narrator, Pokémon Franchise

Conclusion

"Finish Him!" - Narrator, Mortal Kombat

The first significant step in understanding the findings of this research is to understand its implications in the framework of the Neo-Ecological Theory. The addition of virtual spaces to Bronfenbrenner's original bioecological theory, as being separate but equal in influence, is important because, in today's digital age, those influences from the virtual spaces can be much more impactful due to the speed and directness of their impact on an individual. That does not mean that things that happen in virtual spaces are more impactful than those that happen offline; they. What my research leads me to understand is that online and offline spaces are intrinsically linked, so events that happen in an offline space in a person's life may proportionally impact that person's virtual contexts, and vice-versa. This understanding of interconnection between on and offline spaces is essential to neo-ecological theory, and the findings of my research. With this being said, the main reason for this research could come from living through "The Satanic Panic" (Brooks, 2024) in the late 80s and early 90s, overlapping the parental outrage and governmental hearings over the extreme violence Mortal Kombat was going to bring down the moral fibre of the children of the world (Rossen, 2024). Video games have been blamed for many forms of violence (Limbong, 2019). However, even when I made friends playing games like Mortal Kombat in the arcade or Doom or Unreal Tournament online, not only did I not experience moral decay or commit violence, but I pretty much experienced just the opposite. Some of the nicest people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting have been through some of those same violent

video games. Some of the best friends I have ever made have been online while "fragging" or beating others. My kids are experiencing the same thing, only with a much wider variety of games and a much more open mind from those around them. Video games are no longer seen as something basement loners do, playing games no one else has heard of, and are scoffed at for doing so. Video games are mainstream. The video game industry makes more than triple the music and movie industry's combined (Arora, 2023). All of this is changing the way that video games are seen by youth and those who work with them.

Yes, there has been much research done on the bad sides of online and video game spaces. As stated in different parts of this research, these include things like cyberbullying, cybertrouling, addiction, harassment, trolling, and griefing. All things that my kids and I have had to deal with while navigating online spaces. These issues happen much less frequently than the usual everyday pleasant interactions that mainly occur between players. The main issue with the research is that, up until this point, the research on the potential damage, harm, and danger that online spaces may contain far outweighs the body of research about the positive interactions and effects that being in online gaming spaces provides. This research aims to shed light on the positive aspects of online gaming spaces and amplify the potential positive interactions and connections that can be formed within them.

This research aimed to highlight the woeful state of research and understanding regarding an integral part of many youths' day-to-day lives. The first online video game was released fifty years ago this year. Despite this, only a small amount of research has been conducted on the potential positive effects they can have on youth and friendships beyond educational purposes. Since then, the line has been blurred between what "online" and "offline" spaces and relationships consist of. For some youth, these online spaces can become more "real" than their

offline world. That being said, the central aspect taught in Child and Youth Study, from the introduction to the subject, is to "meet youth where they are." Well, there is much work to be done to catch up and be able to do that effectively. However, remember, it is not their job to educate us on the matter. It is our job to research and learn about their spaces so that we can go to them. It is our job to understand that online gaming spaces are just as real and important to youth today as historical offline spaces have been to past generations. As a matter of fact, with the introduction and popularity of augmented reality mobile games like Pokémon Go, the lines between offline and online spaces are becoming even more non-existent. This does not mean understanding every video game meme or quote lines from the latest releases but having a basic understanding of where they are going, what is bringing them there, how they navigate through said spaces, and what role they play in their lives is something we as educators, caretakers, and healthcare professionals need to have an understanding of.

Again, that is not going to be easy. While online video game communities share overarching ideas with significant overlap in how to act, they also often have their own languages, colloquialisms, social hierarchies, and distinct ideologies about what makes friends important. That does not even consider that, many times, youth are part of several online gaming communities and navigating several different peer groups at a time. What we have started to see here through this preliminary research is that the basics of starting peer relationships and growing them into meaningful friendships have a pretty significant overlap with traditional offline friendship building and expectations, with a few considerable differences. What we must do now is expand the research on those similarities and differences so that, as teachers and caretakers, we know how to meet them better online. Even a basic understanding of the overarching norms and expectations when making friends online is essential if we are to

understand what they are going through and come up with practical ways to connect and help them. It is time we start giving equal importance to what they find positive about being online, just as we have to what we think could be negative. Through the expansion of this research, we will be much more effective at identifying what we need to do to help them navigate their online relationships so that we can be there to help them when they need us.

Application

“Don’t wish it were easier; wish you were better.” - Chief, Animal Crossing

While the scope of this research is limited, it not only strengthens the argument that video games should be used more for the positive things they are already used for but also sets up a good foundation for many other areas of potential research in the future.

First is the potential continued expansion of the definition of "third spaces" and their uses, as done with children's literature by Webb (2016) and Bates (2016). If online video game spaces were to be added to the list of third spaces, then their further uses would be possible in many other areas of work with youth. A great example would be the widening of potential therapeutic spaces for youth, much like was argued by Charon (2006), and the use of children's stories. There are very few video games that do not revolve around some story. Those stories range from something as massive as universe-spanning hero epics like the Halo franchise, down to something as simple as moving onto a new phase of life and unpacking boxes after a move, like Unpacking. There are reasons both have won "Game of the Year" in some way, Unpacking from BAFTA in 2022 (Kerr, 2023) and Halo from four different awarding groups in 2001 (Price, 2024). Stories big and small connect to people in different ways, and video games are a unique way of being able to tell stories because they require the input of the user. The story is a key aspect of video games that keeps gamers pushing forward through a game or coming back,

expansion after expansion. Much like those gamers make connections with each other online, there is a significant opportunity for youth workers to be in those same spaces using the same stories to make the same connections with the same youth.

If not joining the large online spaces, using the smaller ones to help with more intimate relationships is an option as well. The example of *Unpacking* is used again because of the type of game it is. While being a single-player game, the story it tells is one many have bonded over. The story of *Unpacking* is a simple yet deep one, while the gameplay is straightforward: in each stage, the player unpacks their boxes after a move because of some life event, and puts their items in the appropriate places. Eight levels that span a story of twenty-one years. Sounds simple, and it is, while the story is emotionally deep. It also tells the story of how the character changes over time. Subtle restrictions, such as where items can be placed due to what is important at that life stage, reveal how the character evolves. The stuffed pig, which had been left on the bed after the first move out for comfort, gets added to a stuffed tiger when moving in with her girlfriend, only to be moved into the baby's crib at the end of the game. Items put in the closet while living with a boyfriend are on prominent display and/or complemented with similar knick-knacks when living alone or moving in with others, telling how she feels during her time in that space. All these little things add up to tell a big story that gamers all over the world have connected to. Those same connections could be had with youth workers if only they were used as another tool in working with youth.

This is only one example. Just like many other forms of media that have in recent years, video games have stopped shying away from addressing mental health issues and have used these issues as part of their storytelling. Yes, video games are still used as a form of escapism to get away from bad things that may be happening in real life (Fraser et al., 2023; Wardon, 2021)

but now, the stories gamers are escaping into may have stories that are trying to help them understand or cope with what they are dealing with in the real world. Games like *Actual Sunlight*, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, and *Limbo* are all centred around characters dealing with depression. The results of trauma are addressed in different ways, resulting in psychosis in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, survivor's guilt in *The Last of Us 2*, or PTSD in *Spec Ops: The Line*. Self-harm in *Darkest Dungeon*. Amnesia in *Disco Elysium*. Addiction in *Martha is Dead or We Happy Few*. Feeling and processing grief in *Gris*, *Lost Words: Beyond the Page*, and *Child of Light*. Anxiety is addressed in games like *Aether* and *Celeste*. Alternatively, there is even the two-game series *Psychonauts* that, across their combined 23 levels, cover everything from potentially more minor issues like fear, regret, and overthinking to significant issues like split personalities, panic attacks, delusions, and Schizophrenia. They do not stop there, though; like many of the other games mentioned, the ways to complete the levels are by helping the main character help others to search for solutions to overcome their own problems. These are all award-winning experiences that gamers have been able to have and bond over, which have mostly gone overlooked outside of the gaming community when it comes to addressing mental health issues they are dealing with. It is time that these games, and others like them, be added to the tools that youth workers use to connect with youth to help them deal with their problems.

Second, by doing more research on how these relationships are formed in online gaming spaces, educators and caregivers can be better informed on what may and may not be effective when it comes to moderating and navigating these spaces in the future. While once again, many of the negative aspects and types of online relationships in gaming communities have been researched to a great degree, without the knowledge and understanding of how positive relationships and interactions take place in these same spaces, effective policies and strategies

cannot be put into place to help them start and flourish. This applies not only to the relationships between gamers themselves but also to those between caretakers, educators, and policymakers and the individuals they work with. While this study has shown that there is the potential for much overlap between how online and offline relationships form and grow, there are some significant differences that need to be understood before they can be effectively used and/or moderated. Mainly, the fact that most of these relationships start anonymously. As stated in the findings of this research, gaming communities are based around the love of said game and the player's skill within it. Games have specifically gone out of their way to take age, sex, gender, race, nationality, mother language, physical or mental ability and many other traditional relationship starting factors and found ways to make them almost non-existent factors when meeting other players in their respective spaces. Unless more research is done to understand how this changes, not only how these relationships form but, how they change as players get to know each other better and reveal more about themselves to each other, it will be hard to understand we as researchers and caregivers can form our own bonds with the youth in these spaces and the appropriate ways to grow them once formed.

Third, utilizing these spaces for education and therapy will be crucial in bridging the gap between caretakers, educators, and those they aim to assist. In the educational setting, online video game spaces have already been shown to be an effective tool for relationship building for teaching and education (Prodigygame.com, 2021; Yeh & Heung, 2022), it is time that this space be used more by caretakers and therapists to build relationships with those they are taking care of or trying to help. There has already been found to be an oversharing behavior with gen z in online spaces (Edy Susilo et al., 2025), that could be a way that we video game spaces to connect since youth are already sharing in them.

While there has been some research done on using video games as therapy (Bocci et al., 2023), and even a few cases of it being used, i.e. Tetris being used to help the reduce the symptoms of PTSD (Butler, et al., 2020), there has been virtually no research done or proposed actions on using the spaces online to bridge the gap between teacher/therapist/caretaker and those they are looking after. With the rise of video games taking on deeper themes of mental health and personal growth, as stated above, it will be necessary to incorporate those online spaces into future caregiving and therapies.

Another area that can be expanded into with online gaming spaces, besides just being a viable third space, is their inclusion in a new type of noetic space for education and therapy. A noetic space, a place where collective imagination can happen and, within the space, new realities and ideas can be formed (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2002; Weinstein & West, 2012). While usually a physical space (Theunissen, 2018), the inclusion of virtual online gaming spaces would seem like a natural inclusion in a place where imagination and new realities and ideas could be created. If, in a traditional noetic space, new ideas are created through the imaginative process, then forming groups and generating new ideas in spaces that have already been birthed through someone's imagination would seem like a natural step in stoking those imaginative juices and feeding creativity when trying to come up with new ideas. By using these created online gaming spaces to connect with gamers and working with possible game mechanics or ways of communicating that are not even possible in the "real world", there may be no end of new ways to work through issues or come up with new ideas of connecting with others.

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