RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

"You Feel Like You've Found a Place Where You Belong": Symbolic Interactionism and Online Social Video Games in the Age of COVID-19

Caitlin Veal[1] (iD), Matt Coward-Gibbs[1] (iD),
Jack Denham[1] (iD), and Matthew Spokes[1]

Abstract
This paper investigates how players perceive and understand the sociality afforded by online social video games (OSGs), framed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing data from semi-structured interviews ($n = 20$), we apply Blumer's concept of symbolic interactionism to explore the ways in which video games take on new meanings in co-constructed, collaborative and contributory digital spaces. We argue (a) that games offer a meaningful social experience, (b) that this sociality flourishes due to the perceived lack of social risk particularly due to OSG characteristics of perceived or real anonymity, (c) that this works to facilitate social development, and (d) that these characteristics were valuable in the context of a pandemic at a time of reduced social interaction. Our contribution shows that online video game spaces alter the risk profile of forming and maintaining connections by reframing interaction as the cooperation toward shared goals.

[1]Department of Social Sciences, York St John University, York, UK

Corresponding Author:
Caitlin Veal, Department of Social Sciences, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX, UK.
Email: c.veal@yorksj.ac.uk

Introduction

Utilizing a study of gaming during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article calls for renewed focus on the supportive, playful, creative, and community-based facets of social interaction within online social video games (OSGs). As such, this research draws on two key strands of inquiry: how do players perceive and understand the sociality afforded by OSGs, and what value did the sociality drawn from OSGs bring to gamers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with young people ($n = 20$) we explore the social functions of player interaction in OSGs—through a symbolic inter-actionist lens—to understand socialization and meaning-making processes that young people experience with different forms of interactive entertainment. By centering our inquiry around social norm disruption during COVID, we consider how participants' social connections and spheres of interaction develop and are mediated by OSGs, and the social and experiential rewards garnered from video game interaction.

To support a focus on social connections and shared experience, we adopt a symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1969) framing for our data. As Blumer (1998, p. 85) notes, "there is no empirically observable activity in human society that does not spring from some acting unit": within this, there are three core ideas underpinning interaction. First, that individuals interact, interpret, and use things based on the meanings ascribed by individuals; second, that the meanings for things are derived from interactions with others and the social context in which they are placed; and third, that an interpretive process is utilized by individuals as they encounter things in their lives, in order to handle, manage, and adapt the meanings they ascribe to these things (Blumer, 1998). From this we will demonstrate how play-spaces are co-constructed, collaborative, and contributory, and how they rely on shared meaning, lore, play-specific language, protocols, and cultural symbols associated with specific subcultures, communities, or game franchises. Ultimately, our symbolic interactionist framing allows us to consider how video games enmesh with established norms of social connectivity.

Our findings demonstrate how social interaction within online gaming affords opportunities for social connection, which also provides anonymity and neutralizes key social risks, thereby allowing for the mitigation of social anxiety and the development of social skills where opportunities to develop these skills are otherwise absent, particularly via the unprecedented social isolation of COVID-19. OSGs alter the risk profile of forming and maintaining connections by reframing those connections as the cooperation toward shared goals, demonstrating the value of OSGs for those who otherwise, due to personal or situational causes, struggle to socialize.

Literature Review

Schroeder (2008, p. 2) defines OSGs as "virtual environments that people experience as ongoing over time and that have large populations which they experience together

with others as a world for social interaction." Understanding online social environments more broadly helps us to demonstrate that OSG spaces function as a unique subset. Keating and Sunakawa (2010) describe online interactions as unique from offline interactions due to being fluid and simultaneous. Coulson et al. (2018, p. 56) state that "with the increasing permeability of offline and online experiences, relationships straddle these shifting boundaries," reflecting ideas of "borderwork" (Aarsand, 2008), where individuals actively manage their online and offline identities. Online participants adapt to different people and places they encounter online or "in-game" by re-organizing meanings attached to these experiences, through language, actions, and perspectives (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). Zhao (2005) outlines how interaction with others who exist within the digital space also influence the sense of self, but this digital self is a constructed narrative based on the elements that are chosen to be represented. This echoes Goffman's (1959, p. 3) observation that sometimes presentation of the self is an intentional process, not only to benefit oneself but also to put others "at ease." As a result, the online self is "orientated inwards toward the world of thoughts and feelings" (Zhao, 2005, p. 400) because ourselves are only interpreted by others from what is consciously shared. When we purposely choose what is shared and what is not, the lack of non-verbal cues commonly associated with expressions and reactions to our self-presentation is therefore not an issue in "validating our self-claims" (Zhao, 2005, p. 401).

Arguably, virtual environments provided by OSGs offer a space for gamers to create an "alternate reality" where typical "rigid cultural-structural codes" associated with identity become digital, flexible ones that allow gamers to "expand, explore, and innovate" in their presentation of their selves (Gottschalk, 2010, pp. 521–522). Goffman (1959) suggests that in the performance of the self we present a "personal front"—a catalogue of expressive equipment that is both fixed (such as race, size, and appearance) and fluid (clothing, expressions, and emotions). The personal front ascribes meanings to an audience who engage with them: in OSG environments the ability to adapt and manage this "personal front" is made more accessible due to the buffer of the game itself.

In understanding the process of constructing identities in OSGs, it is also important to consider why gamers may construct the identities they do. This can be dependent on their reasoning for participating in such gaming spaces. Hussain and Griffiths (2014) highlight how many gamers attach the meaning of "being social" to their online video gaming experiences, thus exacerbating the deep roots of community that are embedded within social gaming, informing the way that these gamers interact with others they encounter. Some gamers even consider the social connections developed through games to be "as 'real' as any 'real-life' friendship" (Williams et al., 2006, p. 352). These virtual online communities within which this socialization occurs are thought of as "narrow and specialized" but simultaneously "broadly social and supportive" (Ellis et al., 2003, p. 148). Ellis et al. (2003, p. 150) stress that online social communities are an extension of physical offline space, with interactions based around shared interests, and should not be seen as a distant "strange alternative world." Similarly,

Robinson's (2007) symbolic interactionist reading of online spaces suggests a mirroring of processes inherent to traditionally understood offline spaces.

Friess (2012) argues that it is a combination of both audiovisual representations and actors' actions within "symbolic" environments which creates a specific process of meaning-making within games. This emphasizes the influence of the game itself in aiding the production of meaning, rather than relying simply on forms of communication. For example, Castaño Díaz and Tungtjitcharoen (2015) demonstrate that players are not simply passive observers who are impacted by the game art, they also create their own stories and understandings of the things they experience that reflect their feelings: meaningful space is influenced and altered due to the relational processes that connect the gamers within the game (Janik, 2020).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggest that communities are often defined by membership and boundaries: being part of the group must be rewarding for members, it should fulfill a need. While they use this description primarily to describe in-person, physical communities, online in-game communities can be considered in the same way through in-game features such as "guilds" in *World of Warcraft*, "tribes" in *Ark: Survival Evolved*, or using out-of-game group chats. Snodgrass et al. (2017) acknowledge how gaming groups may benefit individuals by offering supportive environments, rewarding experiences, and social interaction. This reinforces the findings of Peña and Hancock (2006) where in an analysis of messages between gamers, messages were considerably more likely to be socioemotionally orientated than task-orientated toward the game at hand. This suggests that gamers utilize video gaming groups to benefit themselves in ways that transcend the intended function of the game.

Hagerty et al. (1992) suggest that to feel like you belong is a basic human need, with social support an important factor in feeling valued. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UK lockdown policies demonstrably increased loneliness, negated in part by increasing social support (Groarke et al., 2020); games may act to meet these needs if they are not being readily met in day-to-day life (see Pierce, 2009). Similarly, Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022) outline a marked increase in online social game playing during the pandemic, and highlighted that this had a considerable benefit on these gamers in terms of improving mood, maintaining positive mental health, stress relief, a sense of escape, agency in coping and finally socialization which was deemed to have a particular positive impact on wellbeing. It can therefore be suggested that video games are an effective tool for maintaining social connections and maintaining a sense of belonging within a wider community, thus reducing social isolation.

Community elements of gaming can influence a player's propensity to return to a game, as in-game team norms were shown to increase player commitment (Liao et al., 2020; Teng & Chen, 2014), showing social interaction as a key element of gaming experiences. For those who successfully navigate in-game social relationships, in-game social capital often resulted in increased intention to stay within the community, where strong embeddedness was correlated with enhanced social behaviors (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012). "Presence" has also been found to enhance players feelings of genuine integration within games and gaming communities (Tamborini &

Skalski, 2006, p. 232)—facets like networked voice-chat technologies "provide […] a more natural interface that increases perceptions of behavioural engagement." Robinson and Bowman (2022) even note that acknowledging other avatars in the digital space aided in developing feelings of presence within gaming scenarios. Ringland et al. (2016, p. 1265) state, "having success in this environment then lays the foundation for practicing and honing a wide variety of social skills to be used in a wide variety of environments"—but this connection with the offline world is ever-present, since this is "a good first (not final) step towards enhanced social experiences" (Ringland et al., 2016). Furthermore, Wiederhold (2021) suggests that OSGs provide a space to learn by "doing" both in terms of emotions and sociality, thus suggesting that social and collaborative games can lead to more positive social behaviors such as acceptance, friendliness, and empathy. This is key for individuals who may otherwise encounter difficulties in finding such experiences, whether that be due to distance, location, or psychological difficulties such as shyness, anxiety, or depression (Halbrook et al., 2019; Pierce, 2009; Utz, 2000). The reduced "risk" involved with online interactions has been used to understand how those with social difficulties may find socializing through these channels more attractive with fewer perceived social barriers such as attractiveness, shyness, or stuttering (McKenna et al., 2002). For example, Ringland et al. (2016, p. 1264) note that video games were an integral part in the social lives of individuals with autism as a result of "enabling sociality by providing flexible means of social expression." Therefore, gaming may be considered an assistive technology for those who struggle in this way and offers new ideas about what can be defined as "assistive" (Ringland et al., 2016), offering a space to learn by "doing" both socially and emotionally (Wiederhold, 2021). In the context of the pandemic, with hitherto unknown restrictions placed on our lives, these qualities require further interrogation.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data were collected between October and December 2021. Opportunistic sampling was used (Kemper et al., 2003). Interview informants ($n = 20$) comprised of students aged 18–25 (14 M, 5 F, and 1 non-binary) who self-identified as "gamers." To take part, the interviewees responded to a call for participants circulated around the university.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted on a university campus with two researchers (1 M and 1 F) which lasted between 45 and 70 min. In line with ethics approval, interviews were conducted in person following informed consent. The interviews were made up of three stages: general questions to gather an understanding of interviewee's recent gaming habits during the period of COVID-19, educational uses for video games as perceived by the interviewees, and finally mental health—how participants perceived gaming in terms of a self-care and coping tools.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) approach was utilized as a framework for conducting the thematic analysis of the participant responses. These included familiarization, generating initial codes, searching and reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. This analysis corresponded closely with our socially constructive ontology whereby themes that were uncovered in the data were highlighted through a process of inductive reasoning.

As a broad categorization of the data, inductive themes relevant to socialization emerged. They were (a) where players connected their in-game social experiences to those outside of gaming, or where players attributed a meaning to in-game social experiences in comparison to those outside of gaming; (b) qualities specifically attributed to in-game social experiences (mainly interpreted as a removal of the perception of "risk"); and (c) opportunities attributed to in-game social experiences due to these qualities. These categories are narrativized in the following "Findings" section, as "qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories'," about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the "truth" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). As a qualitative research study, this work does not seek to produce (statistically) representative data, but to outline and tell the stories of our participants so that their narratives can offer insight into the context in question.

Findings

A Meaningful Social Experience

Our data suggest games offer participants a genuinely meaningful social experience through communal interaction and shared positive encounters, mirroring prior suggestions that "play can have meaning that transcends game boundaries" (Sidhu & Carter, 2021, p. 1059). Focusing on player-defined "meaningful" interactions within our data, we note that the way OSGs are experienced may change and evolve over time, owing to the fluid nature of gaming communities (Saldanha et al., 2023). In the context of OSGs a sense of belonging and experiencing shared community values is not an inherent part of online gaming. Instead, these experiences are curated through interactions with others in a way that reflects how meanings emerge within offline interactions (Blumer, 1969).

Through interaction with OSGs, participants described finding connections that allowed them and others to tackle different challenges, thereby illustrating how the play-spaces of OSGs can be understood pro-socially. Davis (2014, p. 507) also contends that online interactions hold the same merit as offline interaction, where "social life moves fluidly between the physical and the digital," and interactions within OSGs can be used to redress the inaccessibility of offline social experiences during COVID-19 with no loss of value, echoing Williams et al.'s (2006, p. 352) findings where "some considered the connections within the game to be as 'real' as any 'real-life' friendship."

Our participants experienced OSGs as bounded social space, which like physical space still utilizes borders and distinctive boundaries (e.g., in the form of group chats and online game modes) that allow individuals to both enter and exit. As the data show, OSG spaces are too rigid to be considered liminal spaces, but participants have the opportunity to practice "borderwork" (Aarsand, 2008) through the management of online and offline identities which move between these distinct spaces:

> P6: I think you can feel like you've found a place where you belong if you find a good community of people, playing a game can help you sort of be happier.

P6 acknowledges the "place" where social interaction has occurred—a social context where they feel they "belong" and can subsequently thrive emotionally. Games allow players to "interweave [their] everyday experience of place with virtual, playful environments' as digital play generates spaces to consider, reject and rethink our mundane and intimate practices" (Hjorth & Richardson, 2017, p. 6). Place-making therefore becomes both a personal process and one that reflects processes of meaning-making in symbolic interactionism with peers in the in-game social space they inhabit. As P6 acknowledges, games provide a positive, safe and separate social environment.

P6's reflection also mirrors Elder (2014), who posits that OSG experiences give individual's lives meaning. Our participants demonstrated that their shared positive experiences of games with others were a means of forming and maintaining connections, reflecting meaning formation through interactions and connections with others in social spaces. As Blumer argues "the human individual pieces together and guides his action by taking into account of different things and interpreting their significance for his prospective action" (1998, p. 81): this helps us to understand why participants would return to games frequently based on the meaning they ascribed to games as being a source of happiness and emotional fulfillment. The meaning of fulfillment can be observed as socially fulfilling too, as video game communities are demonstrated to hold the core association being centered around people and relationships (Saldanha et al., 2023). We can attribute this to furthering our understanding of the way players perceive and understand the sociality afforded by OSGs. For some, the meaning ascribed to games is that they are an effective tool for friend-making:

> P9: I've made more friends through games than anything else. Because despite the toxicity you can find these good friends, and you can learn about connecting with these people.

P9 also demonstrates how it is these social connections that allow participants to experience a sense of belonging, to "connect" with others. Participants also described the value of shared experiences of gaming as a bridge for maintaining and further developing existing social connections, a finding well documented across the literature (Ballard & Spencer, 2023; Tushya et al., 2023; Vella et al., 2019; Williams et al.,

2006). Blumer (1998, p. 85) highlights how "human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of the society is to be seen of consisting of their actions" and it is in this way that shared tasks and objectives, and the creation of play-based lexicons lead to in-game social facilitations with their associated symbolic meanings with these previously known/unknown peers. These shared experiences were described by participants to include things such as coming together to defeat a boss or enemy faction or participating in positive well-being boosting, sentimental conversations as a group, that consolidated the social meanings ascribed to their games.

As well as the implicit mental health benefits of gaming as a tool for self-care during the pandemic (Spokes et al., 2024), these social gaming groups were understood by our participants as offering meaningful explicit networks of support and belonging which elevated their mood. This reflects ideas from Hagerty et al. (1992), who note that the feeling of belonging, to feel a part of something, is a basic human need. This sense of belonging is above and beyond that of simply existing within the boundaries of a community or space (Mahar et al., 2013). Many participants described this sense of being social as a feeling that boosted their emotional wellbeing through the connections formed with others, a finding similarly demonstrated by Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022). It is the shared experience and togetherness that participants valued, the feeling of "belonging," the "community," which thus reflect traditional ideas around symbolic interactionism and the role peer-to-peer interactions have in the formation and definition of different societies (Blumer, 1998).

Social Risk Removal in Online Gaming

Using a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer, 1998; Carter & Fuller, 2016), we acknowledge that individuals act and seek out experiences based on meaning—the meanings they ascribe to their interactions with others in-game and the meaning ascribed to the games themselves. A key aspect of meaning attributed to video games by our participants was centered around perceiving video games as a tool for managing social risk, with anonymity a common factor:

> P4: When you're playing video games people can't see your face. So when they can't see your face you don't have that stage fright of, 'oh god they're staring at me what do I say?' People are just listening, and I feel like people get a lot of comfort from that and you learn how to talk to people.

P4 highlights how the buffer of anonymity—the reduced risk of others not being able to physically see people—helped them to improve their social skills due to the "comfort" that anonymity offered. Without the threat of experiencing "stage fright," P4 experienced a safer social learning environment, improving their social skills. This can be understood as a symptom of broader online life: the feature of anonymity and hidden identity allows individuals to feel they could open up more easily to others (McKenna et al., 2002). In particular, it was the choice of anonymity, the ability to have control over how they portrayed themselves and how they were perceived, that participants valued:

P14: You're not you, you are whoever your username is and whatever you portray your-self as.

P14 acknowledges the ability to choose whether to be themselves or someone entirely different, demonstrating how social gaming experiences can be actively adapted and altered based on the functional meaning ascribed to their gaming experience. Robinson (2007, p. 104) notes that "the cyberself is the emergent product of social inter-action in which the self masters the ability to be both the subject and object of interac-tion." This is essential to the experience; players are aware of their own interactional experiences as well as their part in the interactional experiences of others. The value of choice was further demonstrated when some participants suggested that often they may not always feel the need for the barrier of anonymity when playing with friends, but may prefer to adopt an anonymous persona—a different on-screen name or profile picture—as a buffer when playing with strangers if they are afraid or uncertain about interacting. As a result, the reduced risks of in-game socializing make it a preferable environment for some participants, particularly for those who struggle socially (Ringland et al., 2016), and ultimately supports the development of sociorelational ele-ments like refining social skills and developing social capital (Tushya et al., 2023).

Blumer (1998, p. 2) discusses how "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things they encounter." Understanding this process allows us to identify how participants conceptualized sociality as a core component of OSGs (Saldanha et al., 2023). Considering how online social communities acquire this association, McKenna et al. (2002, p. 10) note that such environments often "lack[s] the usual 'gating features' to the establish-ment of any close relationship." Users feel there is less risk of rejection due to personal characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, general appearance, voice, or accent. As a result, the ability to actively choose how they are portrayed becomes important to individuals who may struggle with participation in the offline world. In this instance, they are actively managing how meaningful elements of their identity are perceived by those who encounter *them*, rather than encounters with the game.

OSG environments are also described as allowing for social risk management by allow-ing participants to exit certain interactions at will, removing themselves from a situation if they feel uncomfortable. McKenna et al. (2002) suggest that individuals who experience social anxiety may feel more able to express their true identities and personalities in these virtual situations than they otherwise would as a result. P14 demonstrates the non-committal nature of relationships formed and maintained in-game by highlighting this:

P14: There's not that sort or logical barrier where you don't want to think like, oh what if they hate me? If you talk to them and they don't talk to you back it's like oh well, it's a stranger on the internet.

The online context of the interaction above shows how social rejection within games does not hold the same weight of failure as it would in an offline social situation. This was a

common theme across our data, alongside acknowledging that on the other hand participants considered social success *equally* and sometimes *more* meaningful than those which occur offline. This demonstrates clearly how meanings are produced and managed based on the function these experiences hold for the user: social success holds more value than social failure in OSGs because of the way gamers perceive these gaming experiences.

Lastly, using OSGs as a social tool also assisted those who struggle in social situations due to anxiety or autism spectrum disorders, as found in earlier studies (Pierce, 2009; Ringland et al., 2016; Weidman et al., 2012). P9 underscores this, noting that:

> P9: Going online and meeting new people, even if you don't speak to them, it definitely helped me get past that barrier and getting used to new people. I still struggle, I've been diagnosed with social anxiety. But getting online and having those points where sometimes you need to talk like in *Overwatch* you need to communicate and that really did help, and I think it has translated.

P9 references the game structure, the "need" to communicate with others in order to achieve in-game success. These data show that even though these in-game social situations are uncomfortable, individuals felt more willing to participate and push themselves to take on these experiences and develop socially.

Social Development through Games

Having shown that OSGs alter the risk profile of social interaction, we should consider how these experiences offer the opportunity for the development of social skills via exposure to situations that otherwise may have been unavailable:

> P2: [...] there's so many awesome ways now with games, especially games with VR which can help people with learning difficulties and disabilities with something that they couldn't normally do or couldn't normally learn.

P2 explains how games afford individuals who struggle socially the opportunity to learn by "doing" (Wiederhold, 2021). P2's emphasis on individuals with disabilities allows us to consider how, often, offline social experiences are less accessible. OSGs, on the other hand, can accommodate these disabilities by bringing social experiences into the home or by allowing a more suitable channel for communication, such as text chat or voice calls (Saldanha et al., 2023). Blumer's (1969) central conception that humans act toward things on the basis of meaning is a key factor when considering the social learning and development presented within our data. Participants in this study discussed how games meant opportunity, and being actively aware of video games as a source of opportunity was a key indicator of ascribed meaning. This supports Blumer's assertion that individuals weigh up certain objects depending on their suitability to be ascribed a certain meaning. This process of engaging with OSGs to perform a particular function can be observed within our data:

> P7: I personally have ASD and I'd say I learned a lot of social cues where you can make these choices. And a lot of answers I would have just said in real life, but you can see the reactions that people have, and they get angry and it's like, why? And you can kind of start to understand it and live these scenarios in your head.

P7 demonstrates using the reactions of online counterparts to inform their own understandings of what behavior would be appropriate if applied to an offline social scenario. Here the participants act based on past experiences of interpreted actions of those around them, reinforcing the symbolic interactionist reading of how individuals learn which behaviors are socially acceptable in certain scenarios, through OSGs. Davis (2014, p. 507) explains that "the integration of past, present, and future offline interactions within online spaces—updated both in real time and asynchronically—aid in the negotiation of experiential and relationship meanings." The video game environment is an effective place to learn such skills because of the reduced risk involved (see also Robinson, 2007).

However, the lack of non-verbal cues may also result in individuals not being able to accurately discern hidden meanings or fully grasp an understanding of how their presentation of self is being fully received (Zhao, 2005). Gottschalk (2010, p. 512) counters this by stating "the factuality of those sociodemographic sign-vehicles we display becomes much less important than the perceived consistency between the sign-vehicles we portray and our behaviours." As demonstrated by P7 in their distinction from online interactions to "real life," aforementioned negative online responses seem to hold less significance and thus can be used as a learning opportunity. Even interactions with in-game characters held similar levels of developmental opportunity:

> P20: I think games were a big part of my life as a testing ground where you do get to make choices and characters will react differently to you. Kind of like, can I be myself? Will this be okay?

Much like P7, P20 describes using interactions with in-game characters as a vehicle for self-reflection, to test how their decisions would be perceived. This enables individuals to ascertain which behaviors would be appropriate in their day-to-day social lives, mirroring Sidhu and Carter's (2021) findings that experiences within in-game contexts can facilitate reflection on how things can or should be approached in out-of-game, real-life contexts. In P20's case, the mechanics of the game afford an ultimately risk-free learning opportunity in how to be perceived positively; as they interacted with artificial characters, the only potential negative consequences remained contained in-game. A similar, if more socially precarious situation is described by P18:

> P18: I just needed to be more socially aware of how I'm perceived by other people that I'm playing with. Because if you are perceived in a certain way, the ease of online is that they can just block you and drop you and there's no pressure of seeing you in real life.

P18 uses other players as a mode of self-reflection to become better informed on appropriate behaviors others they may interact with in "real life." P18 also identifies the difference between offline and online scenarios, describing how when online, individuals who may react badly can "just block you and drop you." This demonstrates awareness not only of the value of online space as a social feedback opportunity, but also that offline space is inherently riskier as a social space with more to lose than "just" being blocked. We see here that the meaning ascribed to these social situations is multifaceted and layered in terms of risk and opportunity, with the purpose for which players are engaging with their games changing the level of weight the outcomes of these situations hold.

It is important to highlight now the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the delimiting of social skills in offline space and how this is potentially mitigated through OSG opportunities. As physical socialization was predominantly prohibited, many of the participants of the study missed out on fundamental adolescent social experiences such as moving to university or finishing their last years of school education. Participants frequently cited the absence of social experiences and opportunities as their biggest loss during the pandemic, which could suggest why these online socializing experiences became so valuable for them.

Navigating Social Experiences in the Age of COVID-19

COVID-19 offers useful context for understanding how video games are experienced as serving a social purpose, key when we consider that the meanings our participants hold for things are derived from interactions with others and the social context where experiences occur (Blumer, 1998). The majority of participants in this study felt that during COVID-19, games facilitated the maintenance of social connections, alongside creating social opportunities in a time of lockdowns and social isolation. The loss of social opportunities and experiences resulting from COVID-19 was frequently discussed by participants in this study. Many mentioned missing out on key social experiences for those in their age group, such as forming friendships at a new university, saying goodbye to their friends after leaving post-16 education or moving away from home with friends, as was the case with P4:

> P4: I haven't fortunately lost anyone to COVID or anything like that. But it's definitely the loss of the social aspect.

During lockdowns, when social contact outside of households was prohibited, video games were a social lifeline for participants to remain connected to friends and pass the time. Barr and Copeland (2022) outline that the increased time spent playing games during the pandemic was noted to have had a positive impact on player's wellbeing, by improving mood and offering opportunities for stress relief, particularly due to the socialization that video games offered. Mirroring these outcomes of increased game playing during the pandemic, participants in this study gravitated

toward their online communities, suggesting that these social groups were more or equally as fulfilling of their social needs as their physical friendships during this time:

> P4: […] a lot of people moved back home for a year. And that's what video games can help with. You can connect with people that aren't near you.

> P5: I couldn't come up and visit my friends because we weren't allowed to. So, we would all be like – we have a group chat now where we'll all discuss if we're going online to have a catch up and I think that's nice to be able to do that every once in a while.

As described by P4 and P5, being stuck at home for a long period of time during lockdowns gave participants an opportunity to connect with people. Participants reported using video games as a means of reaching out to individuals that they would not ordinarily with video games offering a buffer from social rejection while also aiding in the breakdown of the boundary of physical separation.

While it is important to note that the data showed differentiation in types of social relationship—from interactions with complete strangers to mutual friends, the pandemic acted as a shared context for socialization and bond-building. Even those identifying as casual gamers within this study demonstrated their process of interpreting the online gaming space as a way of obtaining meaningful social experiences (Blumer, 1998), with OSGs supporting social perseverance in the face of isolation, uncertainty and loss of social control.

Groarke et al. (2020) note that being young and having mental health difficulties were key characteristics that predisposed individuals toward feelings of loneliness during the pandemic. This is reinforced by the high levels of social isolation described by our participants, in terms of age profile and mental health difficulties. Unlike older generations who struggled to maintain social connections due to digital exclusion (Seifert et al., 2021), our participants combated feelings of loneliness finding meaningful social experiences through social video gaming as many others similarly did (Ballard & Spencer, 2023). Many participants reminisced on these in-game interactions during lockdowns as key positive social experiences, connecting with others that would otherwise have been impossible. Gaming as a tool for overcoming the collective social trauma of the pandemic was clearly present within our data, with participants outlining how games helped shifting the negative experience of lockdown into one of self-development and perseverance.

> P10: [Has your gaming changed as a result of Covid?] Yes, because as I said I would originally stick to myself and do more single player stuff, but it allowed me to essentially branch out a little bit. Because whilst I don't like to admit it, I do enjoy working with other people.

> P19: Before COVID I would talk to them in person but then not talk to them when I'm at home over message or anything. So it took me out of my comfort zone, it got me to play more games and talk to people a bit more over discord and snapchat.

P19 demonstrates social gaming as a necessity to maintain social bonds during the pandemic when face-to-face contact was limited, describing how they took the risk of leaving their "comfort zone" to reduce the risk of social isolation. For P19, two risks (potential social isolation and entering a novel social experience) were compared for their risk and reward factors. Here we observe how social gaming gave participants back the control over their social lives that the pandemic had taken away.

In this way, COVID-19 facilitated the construction and maintenance of social connections that may have otherwise not occurred. P10 similarly notes that the pandemic offered an opportunity to "branch out" past the games that they would "originally stick" with. While limiting social opportunities in one's sense, COVID-19 simultaneously created other, different, opportunities that met the needs of players in a relatively unique social context.

Discussion and Conclusion

Identifying the uses and meanings individuals associate with their play allows for a better understanding of the choices that individuals make in entering these spaces and how effective games are at fulfilling individual needs, particularly within the context of COVID-19. Symbolic interactionism helps us understand how social experiences are created through interaction, language, and shared meanings, and is pertinent to OSGs because of the emphasis on intangible interactions (Blumer, 1998; Carter & Fuller, 2016). The tangible, physical aspect of what we traditionally deem to be "social" is not necessary when meaningful interactions occur between others.

The first tenet of symbolic interactionism, that "human beings interact towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1998, p. 8), is present in the first theme of our data, where purpose was attributed to social gaming and applied as a social tool during lockdowns. Participants demonstrated an active awareness of video games as a source of opportunity, which was a key indicator of ascribed meaning. This meaning of "opportunity" differed in several ways between individuals. We identified individuals who felt games were an opportunity for social learning and development; in other words, participants actively chose to play certain games that offered a safe social learning environment with fewer social stakes and reduced social risk when compared to offline interactions. This trend was highlighted through our focus on COVID-19, where video games offered social opportunities that players struggled to access in day-to-day life during lockdowns, particularly with social difficulties associated with anxiety and autism exacerbating the experience. Participants reflected on how they would make the choice to play certain games due to their communication-dependent, team-based structure, which enabled them to connect with others from around the world and meet new people. Others noted how they purposely coordinated playing the same games that their friends were playing, so that they could play them together and maintain their existing social connections when physically isolated.

Blumer's (1998) second tenet is understanding that the meanings of things are derived from social interactions with peers, thus influencing the context within

which social experiences occur—the meaning of the game for an individual is ascribed based on the context of interaction. For example, if an online social community is formed within the context of offering social or emotional support to players of a certain game, a player may then ascribe their meaning for the game as being for the purpose of social support. The meaning ascribed to games by players determines why an individual will enter a social situation, while the context of interaction determines how and why interaction occurs. Interaction occurring within a particular social context is identified within the findings around games as a meaningful social experience. Participants described their interactions occurring within the social context of emotional support for others, whereby individuals would initiate social interaction with the group when in need of social support, or to offer social support.

Finally, Blumer (1998) suggests that meanings are handled in, and altered by, an interpretive process used by the individual in dealing with the things and experiences they encounter, such as our participant's affinities with characters dealing with the same things they were dealing with in their own lives. Participants noted that creating their own experiences, either by choosing how they present and behave, or allowing them to curate their own social learning environment, served the purpose of mitigating social risks, which influenced the way others in the online gaming space interpreted their interactions. For instance, if an individual perceives a specific game as a platform for making new friends, this may encourage them to interact more with others, with these friendly encounters framing how the game is understood moving forward; the outcome of this sees the games' meaning changing to one of positive sociality.

Our data have demonstrated mechanisms through which OSGs allow for social connectivity during COVID-19. Our contribution has been to offer an understanding of how social experiences are garnered through OSGs in terms of how gaming environments work to modify social risk, through the coordination of shared goals and meaning-making.

ORCID iDs

Caitlin Veal https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5394-2881
Matt Coward-Gibbs https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5982-7630
Jack Denham https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2539-8292

References

Aarsand, P. A. (2008). Frame switches and identity performances: Alternating between online and offline. *Text & Talk—An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse Communication Studies*, *28*(2), 147–165. https://doi.org/10.1515/TEXT.2008.007

Ballard, M. E., & Spencer, M. T. (2023). Importance of social videogaming for connection with others during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Games and Culture*, *18*(2), 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221090982

Barr, M., & Copeland-Stewart, A. (2022). Playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic and effects on players' well-being. *Games and Culture*, *17*(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211017036

Blumer, H. (1969). Society as symbolic interaction. In S. Hier (Ed.), *Contemporary sociological thought: Themes and theories* (pp. 91–100). Canadian Scholars' Press.

Blumer, H. (1998). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C. (2016). Symbols, meaning, and action: The past, present, and future of symbolic interactionism. *Current Sociology*, *64*(6), 931–961. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116638396

Castaño Díaz, C. M., & Tungtjitcharoen, W. (2015). Art video games: Ritual communication of feelings in the digital era. *Games and Culture*, *10*(1), 3–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014557543

Coulson, M. C., Oskis, A., Meredith, J., & Gould, R. L. (2018). Attachment, attraction and communication in real and virtual worlds: A study of massively multiplayer online gamers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *87*, 49–57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.017

Davis, J. L. (2014). Triangulating the self: Identity processes in a connected era. *Symbolic Interaction*, *37*(4), 500–523. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.123

Elder, A. (2014). Excellent online friendships: An Aristotelian defence of social media. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *16*(4), 287–297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-014-9354-5

Ellis, D., Oldridge, R., & Vasconcelo, A. (2003). Community and virtual community. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, *38*(1), 145–186. https://doi.org/10.1002/aris.1440380104

Friess, R. (2012). Symbolic interaction in digital games: Theoretical reflections on dimensions of meaning construction in digital gameplay. In *Computer games and new media cultures: A handbook of digital games studies* (pp. 249–263). Springer Netherlands.

Goffman, I. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin Books.

Gottschalk, S. (2010). The presentation of avatars in second life: Self and interaction in social virtual spaces. *Symbolic Interaction*, *33*(4), 501–525. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2010.33.4.501

Groarke, J. M., Berry, E., Graham-Wisener, L., McKenna-Plumley, P. E., McGlinchey, E., & Armour, C. (2020). Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 psychological wellbeing study. *PLoS One*, *15*(9), e0239698. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239698

Hagerty, B. M., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, K. L., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, *6*(3), 172–177. https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H

Halbrook, Y. J., O'Donnell, A. T., & Msetfi, R. M. (2019). When and how video games can be good: A review of the positive effects of video games on well-being. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(6), 1096–1104. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619863807

Hjorth, L., & Richardson, I. (2017). Pokémon GO: Mobile media play, place-making, and the digital wayfarer. *Mobile Media & Communication*, *5*(1), 3–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157916680015

Hsiao, C. C., & Chiou, J. S. (2012). The effect of social capital on community loyalty in a virtual community: Test of a tripartite-process model. *Decision Support Systems*, *54*(1), 750–757. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2012.09.003

Hussain, Z., & Griffiths, M. D. (2014). A qualitative analysis of online gaming: Social interaction, community, and game design. *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning*, *4*(2), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijcbpl.2014040104

Janik, J. (2020). Negotiating textures of digital play: Gameplay and the production of space. *Game Studies*, *20*(4).

Keating, E., & Sunakawa, C. (2010). Participation cues: Coordinating activity and collaboration in complex online gaming worlds. *Language in Society*, *39*(3), 331–356. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404510000217

Kemper, E. A., Stringfield, S., & Teddlie, C. (2003). Mixed methods sampling strategies in social science research. In *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 273–296). SAGE.

Liao, G. Y., Pham, T. T. L., Cheng, T. C. E., & Teng, C. I. (2020). How online gamers' participation fosters their team commitment: Perspective of social identity theory. *International Journal of Information Management*, *52*, 102095. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102095

Mahar, A. L., Cobigo, V., & Stuart, H. (2013). Conceptualizing belonging. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, *35*(12), 1026–1032. https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2012.717584

McKenna, K. Y., Green, A. S., & Gleason, M. E. (2002). Relationship formation on the Internet: What's the big attraction? *Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(1), 9–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00246

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*(1), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I

Peña, J., & Hancock, J. T. (2006). An analysis of socioemotional and task communication in online multiplayer video games. *Communication Research*, *33*(1), 92–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650205283103

Pierce, T. (2009). Social anxiety and technology: Face-to-face communication versus technological communication among teens. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *25*(6), 1367–1372. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.06.003

Ringland, K. E., Wolf, C. T., Faucett, H., Dombrowski, L., & Hayes, G. R. (2016 May). "Will I always be not social?" Re conceptualizing sociality in the context of a minecraft community for autism, San Jose, USA, May, 2016. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, San Jose, USA (pp.1256–1269).

Robinson, L. (2007). The cyberself: The self-ing project goes online, symbolic interaction in the digital age. *New Media & Society*, *9*(1), 93–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444807072216

Robinson, J. A., & Bowman, N. D. (2022). Returning to Azeroth: Nostalgia, sense of place, and social presence in World of Warcraft Classic. *Games and Culture*, *17*(3), 421–444. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211034759

Saldanha, L., da Silva, S. M., & Ferreira, P. D. (2023). "Community" in video game communities. *Games and Culture*, *18*(8), 1004–1022. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221150058

Schroeder, R. (2008). Defining virtual worlds and virtual environments. *Journal for Virtual Worlds Research*, *1*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v1i1.294

Seifert, A., Cotten, S. R., & Xie, B. (2021). A double burden of exclusion? Digital and social exclusion of older adults in times of COVID-19. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *76*(3), e99–e103. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa098

Sidhu, P., & Carter, M. (2021). Pivotal play: Rethinking meaningful play in games through death in dungeons & dragons. *Games and Culture*, *16*(8), 1044–1064. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005231

Snodgrass, J. G., Batchelder, G., Eisenhauer, S., Howard, L., Dengah, H. F., Thompson, R. S., Bassarear, J., Cookson, R. J., Defouw, P. D., Matteliano, M., & Powell, C. (2017). A guild culture of "casual raiding" enhances its members' online gaming experiences: A cognitive anthropological and ethnographic approach to World of Warcraft. *New Media & Society*, *19*(12), 1927–1944. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816644804

Spokes, M., Denham, J., Coward-Gibbs, M., & Veal, C. (2024). "I wasn't me, grieving in my room. I was Spiderman": Gaming, loss and self-care following COVID-19. *Mortality*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2024.2315961

Tamborini, R., & Skalski, P. (2006). The role of presence in the experience of electronic games. In *playing video games: motives, responses, and consequences* (pp. 225–240).

Teng, C. I., & Chen, W. W. (2014). Team participation and online gamer loyalty. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, *13*(1), 24–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2013.08.001

Tushya, S., Chhabra, D., & Abraham, B (2023). Social networking or social isolation? A systematic review on socio-relational outcomes for members of online gaming communities. *Games and Culture*, 1–29. DOI: 10.1177/15554120231201760

Utz, S. (2000). Social information processing in MUDs: The development of friendships in virtual worlds. *Journal of Online Behavior*, *1*(1), 1–23. http://69.5.5.82/JOB/v1n1/utz.html

Vella, K., Johnson, D., Cheng, V. W. S., Davenport, T., Mitchell, J., Klarkowski, M., & Phillips, C. (2019). A sense of belonging: Pokémon GO and social connectedness. *Games and Culture*, *14*(6), 583–603. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017719973

Weidman, A. C., Fernandez, K. C., Levinson, C. A., Augustine, A. A., Larsen, R. J., & Rodebaugh, T. L. (2012). Compensatory Internet use among individuals higher in social anxiety and its implications for well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *53*(3), 191–195. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.03.003

Wiederhold, B. K. (2021). Kids will find a way: The benefits of social video games. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *24*(4), 213–214. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2021.29211.editorial

Williams, D., Ducheneaut, N., Xiong, L., Zhang, Y., Yee, N., & Nickell, E. (2006). From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, *1*(4), 338–361. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412006292616

Zhao, S. (2005). The digital self: Through the looking glass of telecopresent others. *Symbolic Interaction*, *28*(3), 387–405. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2005.28.3.387

Author Biographies

Caitlin Veal is an Academic Associate and Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Social Sciences at York St John University. Her current research interests include the

social value of video games, spatial structure of digital spaces, online identity, and digital culture. She is also a member of the investigate.games research group.

Matt Coward-Gibbs is a Lecturer in Sociology at York St John University. His research considers the nexuses between play, culture, community, and transgression. Coward-Gibbs is the editor of *Death, Culture and Leisure: Playing Dead* (2020) and is a member of the investigate.games research group.

Jack Denham is an Associate Professor in Social Sciences at York St John University. Since earning his PhD (University of York, 2018), his research has focused on the Sociology of video games, how social interaction is lived in virtual spaces, and how social inequalities are reproduced or addressed in virtual media. Dr. Denham is the co-lead of the investigate.games research group.

Matthew Spokes is an Associate Professor in Sociology at York St John University. His research focuses on the intersections between video games, spatial production, mortality, and representation, as seen in his most recent book *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime* (Emerald). He is also the co-director of the investigate.games research group.