

How **online gaming** has become a social lifeline

"Our entire lives have been leading up to this," my friends joked in mid-March.

The term "responsibility" refers to the act of determining whether or not a person is responsible for his or her own actions. But my friends reassured me that, as lifelong video game fans, sitting on a sofa in front of a TV for an interminable period of time would be a piece of cake. After all, [gamers like me already spend a lot of time in front of our screens.](#)



Even if they sit alone for hours, gamers are not necessarily isolated. In many cases, it is far from the case. With the rise of social media, gamers, particularly those in Generation Z, have mastered the art of creating communities within and around video games. [Gamers form genuine](#), long-lasting friendships with strangers they meet on the internet.

In this day and age of long-term social isolation and mental-health strains, gamers have long had a tool that is now providing some relief to those who have never picked up a controller before. The explosive growth of gaming during the pandemic has shown that many have found a new outlet for much-needed connection in isolation.

When shelter-in-place orders were issued, millions of people around the world turned to tech-fueled distractions like Netflix Party film viewings, Zoom chats, and video games to stay in touch with family and friends.



There's the outer-space saboteur mobile game *Among Us* (which has been downloaded by 100 million people) and the [Jackbox games](#), which combine video chatting and elements of classics like *Pictionary* and have served as stand-ins for in-person happy hours. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is perhaps the most well-known. Nintendo's record-breaking Switch game, released in March, drops players in a tiny tropical town full of talking anthropomorphic animal neighbours who help them redecorate their home, catch butterflies, and grow fruit trees.

During the pandemic, gaming has skyrocketed, reaching people who had previously avoided it entirely, as well as those who had only played occasionally. According to a new study by NPD, an American business-research firm, four out of every five consumers in one survey in the United States played video games in the previous six months. And, at a time when many industries are struggling, gaming sales are surging. This year, global revenue is expected to increase by 20% to \$175 billion (£130 billion).

However, while the concept of socialisation in a game is new to many, video game enthusiasts have been using technology like this for years to build friendships online and stay connected.

Mark Griffiths is a Nottingham Trent University professor who has written about gaming friendships in the pandemic and studied socialisation in video games for decades. In 2003, he published a study that found that connecting with other players was the favourite part of the online role-playing game *Everquest* for one-quarter of 11,000 players. He claims that the study was a direct and early refutation of the stereotype that video games are isolating and that gamers are antisocial (even though those early pandemic memes jokingly played off those stereotypes). In another 2007 study, he examined 912 players of massively multiplayer online (MMO) role-playing games from 45 countries who played an average of 22 hours per week, concluding that the environment was "highly socially interactable."

"Ten percent of those in the survey ended up forming romantic relationships outside of the game," he says. The concept of socialising in a game is not new." Fast forward to 2020, and Griffiths says that when lockdowns began and people had nothing much to do, "maybe they're gaming for the first time, and they realised this was an outlet you can naturally socialise in".