

Video Games As Autistic Bonding

By Atlas Etienne

Press A To Start

In our current digital age where it seems technology is needed for anything, there are plenty of people advocating for unplugging and spending time with loved ones offline. While this is generally good advice and everyone needs to spend time offline, fully unplugging can be difficult for autistic people, who may have primarily online or long-distance social connections. “Well,” you may say, “what if we just restricted gaming?” And if you’ve paid any attention to the title and themes of this piece, you probably know where this is headed.

I’d like to take you on a short and relatively shallow tour of how autistic people can (and often do) use video games to create or strengthen friendships. I’ll bring in some external sources, but I’ll also bring in my own experiences and opinions from people I know. We’ll start out reviewing what information already exists from both autistic people and the people who research autistic people, with a focus on pre-pandemic writings. Next, I’ll dump my relevant personal experiences on you and weave in some of the things my friends and their friends told me about gaming socially. Finally, we can sit around the Atari, Sega, PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo, PC, or other preferred gaming consoles and speculate on how social gaming could look in the future.

Press A to start.

Level 1-1: Coins, Rings, and Headsets

In their own words, autistic people have been playing video games in some form or another for almost as long as video games have existed. In a 2023 article, Autistic advocate Suzanne Roman talked about her family's and her experiences with gaming as both social interaction and stress relief, from the days of text-based RPGs to the current day. For example, her daughter, a young adult, plays for community using games like Garry's Mod and Overwatch, while Suzanne found gaming to be a sort of escapism, where she could exist without feeling like an outsider. At the time the article was written and published, Suzanne disclosed that her sister was engaged to someone she met in an online community related to gaming.

A Wired article by Ryan Rigney (2012) tells a story of an autistic person, at the time a teenager, for whom World of Warcraft seemed to be a special interest. The article notes that massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft can be helpful for autistic players because the nature of the social interactions are different. Similarly, a player with social anxiety, mentioned in the same article that using online voice chat in the game helped him overcome his social anxiety little by little. These online spaces have drawbacks, and some autistic players have had their accounts banned for misunderstandings or run into online mockery, but the benefits of the altered format seem to be helpful for autistic players, whereas the drawbacks are hardly worse than the drawbacks of unsuccessful face-to-face communication.

Further, in Mazurek et. al.'s 2015 study showed that of the 58 autistic adults interviewed, 12 participants saw video games as useful for social interaction. Some

participants played with friends online, and had primarily online friends, whereas others played video games with friends as part of face-to-face interactions (Mazurek et. al., 2015).

Sundberg's 2018 study found that autistic participants had significantly higher levels of perceived loneliness than the non-autistic control group. Participants who played less than an hour a day or more than five hours a day had lower perceived loneliness scores than other participants. Autistic participants who play online games had significantly more friends than those who did not play, and there were no links between online gaming and friend quantity in the control group. 40.5% of autistic participants stated that they'd met a close friend through online gaming, which is important as only 64.7% of the same group indicated that they had close friends at all (Sundberg, 2018, section 4.1).

With this knowledge, we can easily reason that video games can be a tool for social connection in autistic people. This makes sense: games have procedures, logic, and rules (Cross, 2018). Sometimes they have aspects to memorize, like ideal combo moves or which Pokemon are strong or weak to others (Baxter, 2017). As online multiplayer games use text or voice chat, there are no nonverbal cues to try to interpret for any participant; it's all words and perhaps tone, which can be affected by other factors such as microphone quality and the energy level of the player, and given the space, you can also assume that you can bond with other players over a mutual interest in video games (Kochar, 2017). The only visual discrimination is between avatars and characters, not individuals. While gamers in voice chat can be toxic and harmful in some

spaces, this is not the case everywhere, and different games (or even the same game at different times of day) have different environments. Despite this, many elements of online etiquette, both in and out of game spaces, remain the same (see Appendix A).

Of course, like all things, there are downsides to autistic people playing video games; Davis et. al. (2022) found that while autistic participants who played video games were not inherently more aggressive than those who did not play at all, playing “more than average” was associated with higher levels of aggression and social impairment on certain subscales. Additionally, Haines (2023) notes that clinicians and parents worry that autistic children and teenagers could easily become addicted to online gaming and the internet as a whole. Therefore, a balance needs to be maintained between online and offline activity, hopefully without forcing autistic people to damage their relationships with friends they’ve met online.

Level 2-1: Looting, Rioting, and Zombie Outbreaks

The events of 2020, including a pandemic and a series of important but stressful protests and riots, marked essentially a new era, and many things have changed as a result. People who were used to going out of their house regularly for school, work, shopping, and other such tasks had life disrupted, and the disability community was largely affected by this for varying reasons. In the case of autistic people, many of us have anecdotally reported social skill loss, disruption to our routines, and an even bigger sense of missing out than we normally would.

There was one thing that most people I know turned to, to keep social interaction with friends while at a distance: Online Gaming. My own friend group was primarily long-distance at this point already, but with the lack of other socialization and entertainment, we had to improvise. Given the queue times in some of our go-to games, I feel safe assuming we were not alone.

Popular games I've seen mentioned since (or even before) the pandemic have included Among Us (which rose to popularity during the pandemic), Minecraft, online Cards Against Humanity clones, Skribbl.io, Roblox, Toontown Rewritten (a fan-managed reboot of the Disney MMORPG), and Jackbox games. Those are just a few games people have used to create and maintain connections, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

When planning this investigation into video games and autistic social connection, I jumped at the opportunity to put a survey together and send it to my autistic friends, family, and acquaintances. Of the people who responded, all were autistic, and some had

ADHD as well. One person was under 18, but the other responses came from people between the ages of 18 and 34, and about half of the respondents were white. One person reported not playing video games. Of those who did play video games, all respondents reported playing PC games, though many also played home console games, arcade games, mobile games, and card or board games based on video games.

The interesting part, to me, are the “what” and “why” answers. When asked why they play video games, many found it to be relaxing and stimulating without being strenuous. One-third of respondents primarily played video games alone, while about half spent an equal amount of time playing solo and socially. One respondent clarified that they enjoy playing with others, but that they have some games they play alone.

Solo gaming titles included The Sims, Animal Crossing, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Soul Caliber, Terraria, Minecraft, Bloons Tower Defense 6, Tetris, Guitar Hero, Pokemon, Sonic, and Mario. Except for Terraria, Minecraft, Guitar Hero, and certain variations of other games listed, the majority of these games are single-player games with no multiplayer option.

For social gaming, Minecraft and Jackbox Games were noted by 67% of users. Roblox and MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XIV, and Toontown Rewritten were reported by 50% of users. 33% of respondents played Among Us and any game with a local-multiplayer function (games where players have to be in the same room, generally). Finally, other one-off titles included Cards Against Humanity, Call of Duty, Stardew Valley, Left 4 Dead 2, and Terraria. All reported playing with other autistic

people, many played with allistic (non-autistic) and neurotypical people, as well as friends and family. One person reported playing with strangers somewhat often.

Playing multiplayer games was valued by one respondent because when playing with strangers or new friends, the game felt like a buffer that helped remove awkwardness. Others noted that social gaming was a great way to bond with friends, and one pointed out that even when that's not the case, some games require playing with others, and some games are simply more fun with other people involved.

When asked how it felt to play games with other people, one noted that they play with their best friend when they are stressed, and that they feel known, as their friend understands which games they should play and how the respondent likes to play. Everyone found it fun, but some noted that sometimes you play with toxic people or people who make things uncomfortable.

In my case, I've bonded with my siblings while playing Toontown Rewritten, Minecraft, and Roblox. With friends, I've played everything I had access to. My first date with my long-distance partner was hosted on a Minecraft server, with a map that I spent a week creating. One of my best friends and I bonded over Final Fantasy XIV, and a lot of our hangout sessions are centered around video games in some way or another. Additionally, I strengthened a connection with someone who I had considered an acquaintance at the time by gaming in person; we played Sonic Heroes together, casually competing against each other and having a blast. I lost all but once, but I bonded with that person, and we became good friends.

I play video games both solo and socially. I find a sense of stress relief and distraction in gaming, and much like with reading, it allows me to step into a life or adventure that I don't currently have access to. Additionally, games like Minecraft have helped me to work through troublesome emotions and situations; something about having the game to focus on and allowing my thoughts to come and go in the background helps me to deal with whatever is going on in my life. At the same time, I enjoy social gaming more with friends than with strangers, and I'm a fan of MMORPGs, Minecraft, and Roblox, among other games. I can't say I've made any new friends from gaming, but I have strengthened the friendships I already have, which is just as good for me.

Level 3-1: What Social Gaming Will Look Like In The Future

When looking at how social gaming could change in the future, there are potential upsides and downsides. With a push towards more accessible gaming in recent years, including adding easier difficulty levels to some games, different keybind and personalization options, and better support for colorblind players, we could see an increase in access for gamers of all sorts. This is only improved by the creation of alternative controllers that accommodate certain mobility limitations. As such, it's possible that one day, most disabled people will have complete and total access to solo and social gaming. This impacts everyone, giving even non-disabled gamers more customization options that are not essential but are still appreciated.

There is a chance it could go in a different direction entirely; with the rise of intolerant attitudes towards social justice and inclusion, we may see fewer people willingly working accessibility into game design, and fewer rules against discrimination. The gaming environment might get more hostile towards marginalized people, or it could remain as it is now, not hostile so much as ignorant towards us.

The most likely outcome from my point of view is that neither extreme will prevail; odds are, we will continue to see progress from some developers, but accessibility may never be the primary goal of the video game industry. The games that are accessible will have the support of disabled people who find joy in their existence.

Most important to the scope of this conversation, though, is that autistic people will continue to play games and make and strengthen their connections with other gamers, autistic or otherwise.

Game Over (Press A to Try Again)

When I initially set out to research and write about video games in this context, I did not know what to expect, other than a blog post or two by a self-advocate who enjoyed gaming. I didn't expect to find blog posts, academic articles, and even chapters from full books on disability that addressed video gaming in autistic people. I expected that most of this data did not exist, and I was pleasantly surprised; it was the best possible way to be proven wrong.

Disability culture, especially in the digital realm, is a rich area that deserves further study. Even my friends and family who would not describe themselves as gamers have some gaming knowledge, even if they learned it from someone else. Of anything used to bring people together, it makes sense that it would be an interactive and multimedia experience like gaming.

Hopefully, now you have this understanding: Autistic people have played video games for about as long as video games have existed. Video games can create or strengthen social bonds, and can be an alternative way for autistic people to socialize without all the stressors and other factors that can make face-to-face connection difficult. In the future, we will likely continue to see some games pioneer accessibility features that other games overlook.

This may be game over for now, but you've unlocked new knowledge and this new resource. Next time, you'll probably encounter me as a healer. Stay in my line of sight and I'll help you survive.

Press A to try again.

Appendix A: Gaming Etiquette for Noobs

This is not important to the main body of the piece; this was purely an excuse to infodump.

- If you're playing a game with dungeons, raids, or other team-based game modes, you will need to know about Tanks, Healers, and DPS players (see glossary below)
 - Tanks: If there is a healer present, just act like you're chained to them. Act like you're partnered up. The healer's core focus should be the tank, but they cannot heal you if you're not managing the enemies attacking them or if you keep running out of their line of sight. Work with your healer. You are the deciding factor of most matches or dungeons; if you're good at what you do and your healer is decent, you'll make it through; if you're not present, the team's odds of survival drop massively. You are the most powerful player on the team.
 - Healers: If there is a tank present, act like you're chained to them. DPS players usually either have self-heal abilities or an understanding that they'll die a bunch. Focus on DPS players once the Tank is stable, and if everyone's stable, *then and only then should you focus on dealing damage*. Pay attention to combos if you have any. Healing is your main task. Also, don't get an ego; a healer is the most important player because they ensure everyone else

stays alive, but an ego will get in the way of you being a good player.

If you're good, prove it by being the best player you can be.

- DPS: Defend the healer if you can. They are the most important role only because they ensure the tank (and often the DPS) stays alive. If the healer is fine, focus on the big boss, whether that's the huge monster or the other team's tank. You're usually the coolest member(s) of a team, and you're usually the most knowledgeable about the game. You are underappreciated out loud, but everyone loves a decent DPS player.
- You will likely have the option to commend (or upvote, etc.) other players.
 - If you can only commend one teammate, pick one who did an exceptionally good job. If nobody stands out as a good pick, go for the healer. If you cannot commend the healer, commend the tank.
 - If you can commend everyone, commend everyone unless you have a reason not to (such as a player who does not participate, or a healer who is too busy dealing damage to heal damage).
- Teamwork is vital; even if you think your team sucks, you should not say so. If your team loses or dies, you are allowed to be mad or upset about it, but it is not okay to blame others or trash-talk your own team. At least not where they can hear; that could get you banned and it reflects poorly on you in general.

- Gaming terms worth knowing:
 - o7 or o/ appear as greetings. These symbolize a person waving or saluting.
 - TYFP: “Thank you for party” or “ Thank you for playing”, as appropriate for setting.
 - DPS: Damage-per-second, a sort of category for certain in-game classes, jobs, or characters. These are neither healers nor tanks (though many healers have DPS moves), and their jobs are usually to handle smaller enemies (in MMORPGs, these include “trash mobs” or “adds”) in between helping deal damage to bigger enemies.
 - Trash mobs: relatively easy enemies to fight, often found in bulk in MMORPG dungeons and raids. They can be dangerous because they find strength in numbers. Trash of course refers to garbage, and “mobs” refers to “mobiles”, because the enemies move.
 - Adds: Additional spawns. Usually easy enemies, similar to trash mobs.
 - Healer: a class/job/character equipped with moves/abilities that heal teammates (and often themselves). While most healers have at least one DPS-type move, these are considered secondary to the task of healing their teammates. While healers often end up

overwhelmed during gameplay, a good healer learns how to multitask. They can be the most important player(s) on the team.

- Tank: a class/job/character known for dealing a lot of damage and taking a decent amount of damage. In games, these are usually the players leading the charge, running forth and attacking enemies either fearlessly or recklessly depending on the circumstance. Everybody loves a good tank, but if you're not careful, you WILL die a bunch.

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